



Reading Interests and Needs of Older People

DOROTHY ROMANI

LIFE PATTERNS often change for persons at about the age of 65 when they retire from the occupations they have pursued. Then they may have new social, psychological and physiological problems which make them exceptional individuals and class them with other disadvantaged groups—the poor, the mentally ill and the physically handicapped. Librarians, in their pursuit of the ideal of library service to all, are concerned with the reading needs and interests of these people and ask themselves questions such as the following: Are these people really very different from average adults? Do they have special reading needs and, if so, how are libraries dealing with them? What research has been done in this area and what needs to be done?

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN READING NEEDS OF THE AGED AND OF THE AVERAGE ADULT

One can easily agree with a statement which appeared in a doctoral thesis in librarianship written for the University of Wisconsin by Elliott Kanner: "Although there has been little systematic investigation of the reading interests of older people, there is strong evidence of the importance of reading in fulfilling a need for the older person seeking entertainment, knowledge, the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, cultural development and companionship."¹

This statement of reading purpose is not very different from that of any age group. It cannot be assumed that at the usually compulsory retirement age of 65 an individual automatically falls into an "exceptional" group. There are innumerable variables. Many people of this age are still gainfully employed, maintain their own homes, travel extensively, even care for their own aged parents. These people are still in the mainstream. Usually ambulatory, they visit their local libraries

Dorothy Romani is Coordinator, Extension Services, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.

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and appear to be reading much along the same lines as they always did.

Once the person of 65 has retired, however, statistics show that he not only has increased leisure time, but that he spends more of this leisure time reading than he did prior to his retirement. In 1969 those over 65 made up 3.8 percent of the working force and 9.9 percent of the total population.² More than 80 percent of people over 65 have some leisure time available each day, with an average of more than five leisure hours on weekdays and 6.5 hours on weekends and holidays. Adults in the 45-64 age group have 3.25 hours of leisure per weekday and five hours on weekends.³ That more of this leisure time is spent in reading is indicated in a survey of 5,000 noninstitutionalized adults which shows that the age group of those over 60 reads more books and magazines than does the group from 40-60.⁴ Reading, a sedentary activity, increases as a leisure time activity as persons grow older, though idleness consumes most of the time, especially in the lowest income group.⁵

Other factors distinguish the older age group from the average younger adult, and cause a difference in reading patterns. Because of the era in which they were born, the 20,000,000 persons over 65 generally have less education than younger people. Seventy percent of those 65 and over have completed eight years or less of formal education.⁶ Though some highly motivated individuals go on to educate themselves, many fall into the near illiterate category. Statistically, more than one-fifth of all those over 65 are considered functionally illiterate, i.e., they have four years or less of school attendance. Seven percent have no schooling at all.⁶

Another consideration for librarians working with this age group is that 5.2 percent of those 65 and over are white foreign born and many read only in their native languages. In a survey undertaken to gather statistical information for an issue of *Library Trends* on "Group Services in Public Libraries," which appeared in July 1968, a questionnaire was sent to seventy-two libraries. Replies from this inquiry showed that supplying books for foreign-language readers ranked second as a problem, especially for cities under 50,000 population. Of the seventy-two libraries surveyed, only twenty-seven reported special collections. Availability of books and periodicals and a wide choice of reading matter was very limited in most smaller communities.⁷ In addition, 5 percent of the aged are confined in nursing or convalescent homes, and need library services brought to them.⁸

COMMON READING INTERESTS OF THE AGED

In descriptions appearing in library literature of library services to the aged in the United States and Canada, and in correspondence with librarians who are active in serving the aged shut-in, the institutionalized or the handicapped, the same reading interests recur. They prefer light romances with no sex, biographies, books in large print, westerns, mysteries, and no science fiction and no books containing violence. The seventy-two libraries which responded to the questionnaire for *Library Trends* showed differences about what librarians thought they should put in book collections for use by the aged. It also showed that more attention should be given to study of what the reading interests and needs actually are. What they stressed probably reflected the physical and mental condition of their readership. Some librarians emphasized books about the accomplishments of old people, nostalgic and inspirational material, some included useful material describing such things as Medicare, job information, and books about the aging process; others suggested a variety of books on topics intended to keep readers in the mainstream.

A project to determine what common reading interests are shared by its older readers was undertaken by the Rhode Island Department of State Library Services. Wishing to compile a short buying list of titles that would appeal to older readers, the library enlisted the aid of fifty-three persons over age 65 (the median age was 73) to read and review books over a four-month period, and recommend those they thought others in their age group would read. The books to be reviewed were preselected by two students working on the project, and various points of view emerged. However, the small test group showed some agreement in certain areas: people who read at an early age enjoyed books more than those who had not read when they were younger; works of fiction with confusing plots and many characters were not enjoyed; large print and dull paper were preferred; depressing books, science fiction or meditations were not enjoyed, although books which held attention were. There resulted a basic buying list of 150 titles.⁹ One must bear in mind that this is a group of well and ambulatory aged, whose reading preferences might be different from those of a comparable group of chronically ill, institutionalized individuals, although the conservative reaction common to the age group would still be evidenced.

Nelson Associates, a management consultant firm, was employed by the Division of the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress to study its service to 120,000 users. The study showed that

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43 percent of the readers served by the division are 65 years of age or older, a circumstance which arises from the fact that most people who have eye problems develop them in later years. The Nelson Associates survey indicates that while reading needs of older readers are different, they are "not sharply different" from those of other adult readers. Answers to the questionnaire indicated that they are less likely to be interested in "how-to-do-it material, special interest magazines, science fiction, books which give frank treatment to sex or violent action." Since they are apt to be retired they have less need for vocational or professional reading materials. The study warns the librarian that while book selection can be done with these special requirements in mind, one cannot ignore the fact that provision must still be made for the few readers who represent a wide variety of reading interests—a common problem in book selection. The study reaffirms the common assertion that there are no stereotypes among older readers.¹⁰

LIBRARY PROGRAMS FOR THE AGED

Libraries are using many varieties of service to try to encourage their older populations to read. Bookmobiles, deposit collections, shut-in services, clubs and programs for seniors, and preretirement programs serve as adjuncts to the public library and its branches.

St. Louis and Milwaukee offer bookmobile services with mobile units especially equipped with hydraulic lifts. This service functions to bring books very near to the older patron who might have trouble getting to a library, and also offers browsing opportunity with a fairly wide selection of books. Detroit and Cleveland preselect books for shut-ins; this can be a very satisfactory service if the librarian gets to know the readers well. While Detroit also uses deposit collections and volunteers with book carts to circulate books, this is never as desirable a solution as the personal guidance of a librarian, although these methods provide rewarding experiences for the volunteer. Among the programs for the well aged given in libraries are those in Boston, Cleveland, and Detroit, offering speakers, films, book talks, and opportunities for participation, all designed to stimulate an interest in reading and the use of library materials. Nassau Library System in New York has had success with preretirement programs.

A program begun in Dallas, Texas in September 1971 is called the Independent Study Project. Federally funded, the project is designed as a cooperative effort of the public library and Southern Methodist University, and provides assistance to adults who wish to study inde-

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pendently toward academic credit by examination through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). The library, as the advisory center, provides professional selection of study guides, reading lists and materials, as well as tutorial services. Seminars are conducted by the faculty of the university, and librarians conduct workshops. The National Interest Council, made up of representatives from universities and libraries around the country, is studying this program and testing its implications for national expansion.¹¹

On a nationwide scale, this kind of project could do much to satisfy one of the older person's greatest needs—a search for purpose in life. This is an innate human trait and one from which no one ever retires, according to Lowell Eklund, professor and dean of the Division of Continuing Education, Oakland University.

Eklund has concluded that older people are not uneducable, but that their motivation has usually been impeded by negative attitudes and discrimination. The aging process can be delayed by well-designed programs for the retired. Education must continue into old age to maintain creativity. According to Eklund, people seem to fall into a three-phase life cycle: formal education is crowded into the first third of a person's life; the middle years are left to hit-and-miss programs of education; and the later years might get a remedial program. However, the old people who are coming along will be better educated and in better physical and mental health. Education must continue into old age to maintain creativity; institutions must not allow the retired community to lose interest.¹²

A comprehensive evaluative study of the types of programs going on throughout the country in libraries has never been made.

BIBLIOTHERAPY

One of the most neglected areas of library research and service to the aged is that of bibliotherapy. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 55 percent of the aged in institutions such as nursing homes which serve the chronically ill have mental problems. The library needs to know how much can be achieved by integrating scientific reading guidance into the overall rehabilitation program in such institutions. The older individual usually suffers severely from loss of self-esteem and disorientation upon removal from a familiar environment and placement in an institution. He has a sense of abandonment and is filled with fear. Librarians working with these individuals have

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observed dramatic response in their patrons, but no attempt has been made to verify their observations with supportive data.

The 1962 *Library Trends* issue on bibliotherapy, edited by Ruth Tews, hospital librarian, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, assembled the best thinking on the subject to that date and made it very clear that the practice of bibliotherapy has validity as a science. Tews defined bibliotherapy as: "a program of selected activity involving reading materials, planned, conducted, and controlled as treatment under the guidance of the physician for emotional and other problems. It must be administered by a skilled, professionally trained librarian within the prescribed purpose and goals. The important and dynamic factors are the relationships which are established, the patient's reactions and responses, and the reporting back to the physician for interpretation, evaluation, and direction in follow-up."¹³

As a result of the stimulus provided by this publication, a bibliotherapy workshop was held in St. Louis, Missouri in June 1964.¹⁴ At this workshop, which pursued the subject still further, Louis Fierman created the term "clinical librarian" and suggested special training for librarians in this field. However, despite this propulsion, the profession has not taken up the mandate to attempt in-depth research in bibliotherapy.

An outstanding program of rehabilitation which includes books and reading in overall therapy is in operation at the Swope Ridge Nursing Home, a nonprofit institution in Kansas City, Missouri. Eighty percent of the persons involved are mentally impaired to some extent, 40 percent severely; the average age is 82. Since its opening in 1957, Swope Ridge has emphasized rehabilitation for its residents. To help its patients maintain mental health, an effort is made to retain for them a way of life as much as possible like life in the community. They begin a twelve-hour daily program of "diversional activities" with a reading of the news at breakfast in the dining room. This is designed to provide conversation and bring in the outside world. The psychosocial activities of the day also include a current events class, daily book reading, and use of the library. A librarian from the public library gives a book review once a month and relatives are encouraged to read to the patients.¹⁵ Attempting bibliotherapy in the average facility would be most discouraging for a librarian, since rarely is the administration of a nursing home seen to be as enlightened and vitally interested in the mental rehabilitation of its patients as Albert G. Incani, administrator of Swope Ridge. The close observation of a patient's response to reading needs

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involves the cooperation of doctors, other nursing home staff and the librarian. Since staff in these institutions up to this time seem to be primarily concerned with physical needs, it is little wonder that not much has been done in the area of bibliotherapy.

READING AIDS

LARGE PRINT BOOKS

Many of the aged share disabilities which limit their reading: they are blind or nearly blind; they have suffered from strokes; or they have lost the use of their hands or arms through amputations, severe arthritis, palsy, and other muscle or nerve damage.

The following table cites some specific figures:

TABLE 1

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF 65+ PERSONS IN THE UNITED STATES ELIGIBLE FOR SERVICE THROUGH THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS DIVISION FOR THE BLIND AND PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED

Impairment	Estimated Number of 65+ Persons Impaired
Severe visual impairment	1,086,652
Paralysis	282,699
Absence of extremities	539,334
Problems with upper extremity and shoulder	679,681
Estimated Total Number of 65 and over Persons Eligible	2,538,366

Source: *Prevalence of Selected Impairments, United States, July 1963-June 1965*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service. Cited in *National Survey of Library Services to the Aging*. Cleveland Public Library (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Libraries and Educational Technology). Dec. 1971, Exhibit IV-11.

In *The Exceptional Individual* Telford and Sawray maintained that:

Vision is less efficient among older people than it is among younger adults. Ability to discriminate small objects decreases in the aged as does color sensitivity; the pupil size of the eye diminishes with age resulting in a reduced amount of light reaching the retina. Older persons require more light for good vision and, as a result, their vision shows more relative improvement than does the younger person when illumination is increased.

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Visual accommodation (the ability to focus on objects at varying distances) is less good among the aged. The eye accommodates to nearby objects by shortening the focal distance of the lens. With age the muscular system weakens and the lens loses its elasticity thus decreasing accommodation to objects close to the eye.¹⁶

The American Library Association long ago recognized the need for books in larger print with its list *Books for Tired Eyes*.¹⁷ In June 1959, ALA published a selective list called "Reading Aids for the Handicapped" which included available sources of large print materials.

To demonstrate the need for and interest in large print books, the New York Public Library, supported by a federal grant, started its Large Print Book Project at its Donnell Library Center (20 W. 53rd Street, Manhattan) in June 1966. Only two publishers—Ulverscroft, a British company, and Keith Jennison of New York—were publishing books in large type at the time the project started. When it ended in 1968 nine publishers were involved; by 1972, at the ALA convention, twenty-eight publishers were displaying books in eighteen point or near eighteen point type. From an early Xerox experiment with 11½ by 15½ inch spiral-bound cardboard covered books printed on just one side of the page, large print books have evolved into handsome editions in standard format. Practicing librarians in the field know that the demand for large print books is insatiable once patrons have been introduced to them. The greatest need is for a wide variety of popular titles in standard size and light in weight. The Ulverscroft Company, with more than 500 titles, offers the largest collection in a well-received light weight, while the Franklin Watts publishers are the largest American contributors to the field, offering mainly the older classics. At present the only company filling the great need for recent popular titles is G. K. Hall, which publishes them at the rate of twelve every two months. The Magnum Easy Eye Books, put out by Lancer Books, New York, are printed on green-tinted paper with larger than ordinary print. This series can satisfy the needs of those older readers who are not severely handicapped and is less expensive than the other large print books.

The New York Public Library published its conclusions and recommendations after the Donnell Library Center had ended its two and one-half year project demonstration.¹⁸ These attest to the growing availability and popularity of large print books and a need to develop service outlets to potential users through mailing, rotating deposit collections in nursing homes, hospitals and community centers, and service to the homebound. Budgets should include money for continuing

publicity via bookmarks and printed lists, radio, and advertising cards in public transportation vehicles. It is essential to continue to publicize the availability of large print books to encourage their use among older readers who thought they could no longer read.

The recommendations stress the need for libraries to find additional funding through government or private sources to build up a complete collection of large print books, since in general the cost is high. New York found too, that to have a balanced book collection it was necessary to provide for the expensive reproduction to order of current titles. Hopefully the new G.K. Hall series would preclude this.

A further conclusion was that large print collections would best be handled on a rotating basis through a library system, regional, county or state distribution plan, to spare the budgets of small individual libraries.

OTHER AIDS

The 1966 amendment to the Library Services and Construction Act authorized federal funds for establishing or expanding a program of library services to the blind or physically handicapped. Such persons are defined in the act as those "certified by competent authority as unable to use conventional printed materials as a result of physical limitations,"¹⁹ which has made it possible for older persons with other physical limitations than poor eyesight to borrow talking books and cassettes from the Library of Congress through state and local libraries.

Since only 3.8 percent of the blind over age 65 use Braille,²⁰ other technical devices are needed when large print is no longer adequate; for such persons the Library of Congress talking books and cassette tapes are usually the answer. While print scanners which transcribe print into tone patterns (Visotoner and Stereotoner) are available, they are not useful for the aged blind.

The Nelson Associates study showed that 91.3 percent of surveyed readers over age 65 preferred the talking book machine over other types of equipment. The older group of users, most of whom became reliant on this service in later life, tended to feel that the service was good and their needs were taken care of.²¹

New illuminated magnifiers such as the Optiscope enlarger, made by Opaque Systems, Ltd., of Hempstead, New York and the Ednalite master lens handled by Gaylord Brothers, Inc., have great potential for making it possible for older readers with sight problems to read any library book or periodical. Tactile reading aids which convert a printed

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image to a form a blind reader can use—vibrations under the fingertips—might someday be simplified and perfected to a point where an older blind-deaf person could learn to use them, especially if his disabilities occur early enough in life. "Reading Aids for the Handicapped,"²² carefully selected and annotated by a special committee of the Association of Hospital and Institution Libraries, is an invaluable list with available sources of recommended devices, services, and large type books for the handicapped. An expanded revision is in preparation and is expected in 1973.

Other less exotic and expensive resources that libraries can draw upon to serve the handicapped are the readily available paperback books for the aged person with adequate eyesight who finds it difficult to hold a heavier book, especially if he reads in bed. For that often ignored handicapped individual, the aged illiterate, there are handsome picture books of informational value, as well as high interest, low vocabulary materials in the children's collections. Libraries cannot be bound by tradition in selecting materials for their exceptional users.

RESEARCH ON READING NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF THE AGED

The documentary report of the *National Survey of Library Services to the Aging*,² undertaken by the firm of Booz, Allen and Hamilton for the Cleveland Public Library, did not include an evaluation of reading interests and extent of library use by the aging. Although an attempt was made to identify research on needs and reading interests of the aging, it was found that "it was not possible to identify any current, comprehensive, and systematic studies of the needs of users and non-users of library services among the aging."²³ It recommended that on the basis of the study, a survey be made of user/nonuser library needs of the aging.

ALA's Committee on Library Services to an Aging Population, in planning for the 1971 White House Conference on Aging, requested Wayne State University's department of library science to conduct a survey of services to the aged in ten cities with active programs. The case studies were undertaken by eleven students working toward a library science degree in a gerontology fellowship program. Genevieve Casey, associate professor and public library specialist in Wayne State's department of library science, coordinated the study. The students surveyed institutional services, the well aged, shut-in services, reading habits, programming, user participation, administrative matters and use of large print materials.

Some conclusions drawn from the data gathered in this study, necessarily limited because only ten libraries were studied, showed that libraries are serving only a small percentage of the over-65 population; more and better training is needed for librarians in the field; more useful information is required on the reading needs of the aged; and governments must supply more money to provide better and more complete service. Evaluation of the case studies indicated that more data is needed on the effectiveness of various patterns of library service to the aging and the reading interests of the aged. Casey, in her summary of the case studies, noted that more research is needed on the information needs of the aged and in identifying, analyzing and evaluating programs for the aged which are taking place in libraries throughout the country.²⁴

A further reinforcement of these findings is the statement by Elliott Kanner, cited earlier, who made an exhaustive study of the literature of gerontology for his doctoral thesis at the University of Wisconsin. He concluded that "there are . . . virtually no studies to date of the reading interests of old people. Do they differ from the population at large? Are there changes in reading habits related to social role?"²⁵

As a result of these conclusions, Margaret Monroe, professor of library science at the University of Wisconsin, has proposed a study to be conducted by the Committee on Reading for the Aging of the International Reading Association, to examine the effects of retirement on reading habits and interests.²⁶ The study would compare the reading patterns of two groups—teachers and factory workers—before and after retirement. In the summary overview to her proposal, Monroe points out that except for those working adults who read to relax from tension and forget problems of the job, most read for a purpose. The professional worker, she feels, is more likely to read vocational material necessary to the job, while the factory worker would not have the pressure to read job-associated material and would be more apt to pursue varied reading interests. Therefore, she concludes, the factory worker upon retirement would experience less change in his reading pattern than the professional worker, who, relieved of the necessity to read for the job, would branch out into a wider range of subjects.

Monroe would expect that the teachers in her proposed study would have read more all of their lives than the factory workers, and that this established reading habit would continue. She would also have her study show how reading can help the retiree face many problems of retirement. Sociologists, for instance, have long pointed out the great

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need for the older person to keep his identity and if necessary to seek a new role in life. Books can help the retiree make these adjustments. Because older persons appear to have a universal interest in reviewing their lives, she sees this leading to a new interest in autobiographies and also in reading dealing with the philosophy of life. It is Monroe's hypothesis that retirement may stimulate new reading patterns that were not evident previously. It will be interesting to see the results of this study if it is pursued and published. To date it is the only study of its kind to be proposed. Although library programs for the aging existed before 1950, more interest was generated in the library profession in the 1950s and 1960s following research done by other professions. In 1957 the ALA surveyed library services and activities for the aging, with the advice of a committee established for the purpose. In part an outcome of this research was the statement called "The Library's Responsibility to the Aging,"²⁷ referred to in Javelin's paper in this issue.

In 1969 a committee of the Association of Hospital and Institution Libraries of ALA produced *Standards for Library Services in Health Care Institutions*, which includes service to aged in nursing homes and convalescent homes and sets standards requiring provision of "current and standard titles in fiction and nonfiction," "books in languages other than English" and "books in large type." The standards expressly state that audiovisual materials, including talking books, should be provided.²⁸

The graduate program for students in service for aging, begun in 1969 at Wayne State University in cooperation with the Institute of Gerontology at the University of Michigan, was the first of its kind in the country. It has contributed extensively in interesting library administrators and librarians in this area of service.

A further impetus to libraries to direct attention to the aged population should result from the monumental feasibility study coordinated by Allie Beth Martin, Director of the Tulsa City/County Library. The Public Library Study Committee of the Public Library Association working with Martin had as its purpose the identification of current problems of libraries which cannot be met because of inadequate funds. The committee sent interviews and questionnaires to 306 libraries and individuals with a 69 percent response. In the resulting publication of ALA, *A Strategy for Public Library Change*, the committee listed as one of the most pressing problems the need to serve the aged, along with the disadvantaged, disabled, and institutionalized. It found that higher education is not now meeting the needs of older citi-

zens, and that in the future greater emphasis will be placed on continuing education through the adult years.²⁹

Since major needs of older people are usually identified as income maintenance, preservation of physical and mental health, and finding a role in life, there seems to be ample evidence that libraries and library schools should be activating pre- and post-retirement education programs, information and referral centers, continuing education, and bibliotherapy. Providing materials to keep the aged creative and functioning at their maximum capability should be of primary importance in all types of libraries.

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Some people are fond of reading, while others consider it to be a waste of time. Different people have different attitude to reading. Some of them have dozens of books in their houses and consider reading to be their favourite pastime. Other people prefer watching TV to reading books. Personally, I get a lot of enjoyment out of reading books. Our family loves gathering in the sitting room in the evening and reading books: fairy tales, novels, detective stories, thrillers, fantastic stories and what not. Older people require more attention and extra care and the touch of relatives. But because of generation gap and poverty, they are often ignored and that's a horrible experience for them. Again, naturally aged people can't do physical labor and that's why they have very practical contribution to the society compared to their young counterparts. With less workforce and taxpayers, the demand of medical care is increasing. The elderly need to go to visit hospitals more frequent than the young do. Therefore, the demand for doctors, nurses and medical facilities will eventually outweigh that of supply, due to less workforce and taxpayers. Meanwhile, same theory applies to the individual families that each family need to shoulder more responsibilities of taking care of the elderly. In particular, target older people who are identified as being most at risk of a decline in their independence and mental wellbeing (see section 1.5).

1.1.2 Involve older people in the design and delivery of activities.

1.1.3 Ensure each activity: includes a clear description of what is on offer. takes place at regular times and in a regular location. provides the opportunity to socialise.

Contact older people at greater risk to find out more about their interests, capabilities and needs and develop a relationship with them. Provide information for those in contact with older people about the range of local activities and services available. Coordinate support to help older people use local services.