

# Waldo and Walden: Can They Coexist in the School Media Center?

by Diane Kessler and Karen Perry

Every day we are surrounded by popular culture in its many forms—it affects everything we do, everything we read, everything we watch. No single group is influenced more by popular culture than school-age students, and no group of librarians is more aware of the abundance and diversity of popular culture than school librarians. Students keep school media coordinators abreast of many current trends by talking about and requesting certain information. For example, a new television show or movie instantly brings requests for information about the actors and actresses, the settings, the lifestyles portrayed, even the fashions in dress and furnishings.

Popular culture in all its forms is an important part of students' lives. Because of the vast influence of television, this generation of students has had far more exposure to popular culture than any other generation before it. School librarians want to provide their students with the types of material they request, but how worthwhile are popular culture materials and how much time and money should library media specialists spend on such items? This question is part of a larger dilemma for school librarians: in an age of decreasing funding and increasing accountability, how does one make purchasing decisions?

School library media personnel are all too aware of the transient nature of many educational trends. The same is true for popular culture: by the time popular culture materials can be ordered and processed, their popularity may have waned, and students may be interested in something totally different. For example, who can question the ephemeral nature of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and New Kids on the Block? School librarians must decide what emphasis to place on popular culture

materials based on their collection development policies, existing collections, financial resources, and clientele.

## Making Collection Development Decisions

The first consideration for school library media specialists is the media collection. What should the school media collection include? According to *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*, produced by the American Association of School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, "both students and teachers are

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entitled to collections that provide access to current, representative, and appropriate resources and information that will satisfy their educational needs and interests and match their individual learning styles."<sup>1</sup> These are the primary goals of collection development in school media centers. Indeed, the need to support the curriculum and to provide materials, in all types of formats, is the main focus of the school media program. *Information Power* continues, "In addition, materials are needed to enrich and extend the curriculum and to meet the personal information interests of students."<sup>2</sup> The latter state-

ment indicates the lower priority given to popular culture materials by the groups that set standards for the profession.

All school media centers should have written collection development policies. The challenge for school librarians, as for most librarians, is following these policies while balancing what is required for educational purposes with what is requested by users. Librarians disagree on what should be emphasized. Some librarians feel strongly that only quality, "classic" materials should be purchased for the school library. Loertscher and Ho state that "The single reason for building a library media collection in the schools is to support the curriculum of that school. . . . The trend for excellence in education now demands that a more focused approach be attempted. Money spent on library media collections should have a payoff in terms of curricular benefit."<sup>3</sup> In an article in *School Library Journal*, Eleanor K. McDonald maintains that when school librarians purchase both traditional, classic materials and popular culture materials and put them together in one collection, library patrons receive confusing, conflicting messages.<sup>4</sup> She goes on to describe most popular culture

books as "literary Twinkies."<sup>5</sup> Bernard Lukenbill explains that librarians quite often feel that they are responsible for creating an atmosphere and developing collections that will help their clients become culturally literate and enlightened;<sup>6</sup> popular culture materials are inappropriate in such collections.

On the other hand, some specialists insist that librarians need to learn how to balance their collections so that the "junk becomes only part of a rich and diverse mixture."<sup>7</sup> If students can be lured into the library by popular culture materials, then they might go on to read other things.

Barbara Genco urges school librarians to include mass market materials in their collections, believing that students, especially reluctant learners, will react favorably to the library and its collection only if the librarian has responded to their interests.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, Genco argues, school librarians are in danger of becoming "cultural enforcers for society."<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not to add popular culture materials to school libraries is a question directly related to budget constraints. School librarians, who stock more nonfiction (58.8%) than fiction (41.2%)<sup>10</sup> have less inclination to buy ephemeral material when they know they will be held accountable for buying materials to support the curriculum. How can media coordinators justify spending part of their inadequate funds on materials that are sometimes considered "trash" or "junk food for the mind" and are usually of passing interest? As noted by Marilyn Miller and Marilyn Shontz in *School Library Journal*, surveys of school library expenditures done over the past ten years show that funds for school media center collections have continued to decline;<sup>11</sup> this is certainly familiar to school librarians, who must often compete for funds with teachers, the athletic department, and the cafeteria. Miller and Shontz also found that in school media centers the "median per pupil expenditure for books in 1989-90 was \$5.48."<sup>12</sup> In 1990 the average price for a children's book was \$13.98; for an adult book, \$20.01. This means that "the average elementary library media specialist could purchase a little over one-half of a book per child; the average secondary library media specialist could purchase one novel for every four students."<sup>13</sup>

A final consideration for school librarians in making decisions about collection development in general and popular culture in particular is their clientele. *Learning Connections*, the new guidelines for school media programs in North Carolina produced by the State Department of Public Instruction, emphasizes "the individual school's curriculum, community standards, and faculty and student needs and interests" when building collections.<sup>14</sup> *Learning Connections* then puts the importance of students in perspective when it

concludes that "Students are at the heart of the program. Consideration of their developmental needs, learning styles and levels of ability is critical when selecting resources and designing instruction."<sup>15</sup> Students' personal interests can be added to this list of considerations.

### A Balancing Act

How can school library media specialists support the curriculum, provide the type of popular culture materials that students ask for and need, and stay within very limited budgets? An informal survey of school librarians across North Carolina suggests some interesting ways to do this. First, most school librarians who do collect some popular culture materials purchase paperbacks. These usually include such series titles as Sweet Valley High, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Waldo, and the Babysitters Club, or trade paperbacks by popular authors such as Stephen King, Judy Blume, and Dean R. Koontz. A second solution is to subscribe to periodicals that focus on popular culture subjects. There

are a number of these, they are usually inexpensive, and they have the added advantage of having to be ordered and processed only once. These magazines will be "new" nine times during the school year, while a biography of Milli Vanilli or MC Hammer is only one item, is more



*Periodicals that focus on popular culture subjects are enjoyed by students at high school libraries and are used by teachers to help support the curriculum.*

— Photos by Karen Perry.



expensive, and may not be in vogue by the time it is received. There are numerous periodical titles from which to choose, and school library media specialists can select the ones that will serve their students best. As Lukenbill points out, "Car magazines such as *Car and Driver*, *Hot Rod*, *Road and Track* are very popular with an audience which is largely male, young, and affluent."<sup>16</sup> School librarians who order *Thrasher* magazine are catering to skateboarding interests, while an order list including *Sassy* aims to meet the interests of high school girls. In general, purchas-

ing popular culture items other than periodicals may be frustrating for schools, which normally use purchase orders and requisitions and usually have to follow rigid purchasing guidelines.

Purchasing paperbacks and periodicals is the primary way that school librarians respond to the demands for popular culture materials. School librarians have found that other formats for popular culture such as audiotapes, videotapes, and compact discs are expensive, are easily stolen, and frequently contain an unacceptable amount of profanity, sex, and/or violence. School librarians do purchase videotapes that support the curriculum, such as those produced by *National Geographic* and *Nova*. Popular music videos, however, are often rated R or PG-13, which means either that they cannot be shown at all, or that students, depending on their ages, will have to have individual parental permission to view them. The videos also have limited relevance to the overall school program. A few audiotapes and compact discs may be purchased by school librarians, but these are usually bought for use in the chorus, band, or other musical programs or to augment other disciplines and are not primarily popular culture items.

In a climate of reduced budgets and increased accountability, school librarians attempt both to support the curriculum and to supply popular items that students request. There is a continuing debate over how much popular culture materials to purchase for school libraries. This debate will intensify as more and more school librarians have to make purchasing decisions that both support the teaching curriculum and respond to the interests of students, while staying within a strictly limited budget. Because of financial constraints, most school librarians are likely to continue to purchase primarily the less expensive popular culture items such as paperback books and periodicals.

## References

<sup>1</sup> American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> David V. Loertscher and M. L. Ho, *Computerized Collection Development for School Library Media Centers*, 1st ed. (Littleton, CO: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 1986), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara A. Genco, Eleanor K. MacDonald, and Betsy Hearne, "Juggling Popularity and Quality," *School Library Journal* 37 (March 1991): 118.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>6</sup> W. Bernard Lukenbill, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Popular Culture as Sources of Behavior Information for Youth," *Catholic Library World* 56 (April 1985): 382.

<sup>7</sup> Genco, MacDonald, and Hearne, 117.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Diane Roback, "Checking out Children's Books," *Publishers' Weekly* 237 (May 31, 1991): 38.

<sup>11</sup> Marilyn L. Miller and Marilyn Shontz, "Expenditures for Resources in School Library Media Centers FY 1989-1990," *School Library Journal* 37 (August 1991): 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> North Carolina Dept. of Public Instruction. Division of Media and Technology Services, *Learning Connections: Guidelines for Media and Technology Programs* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1992), 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>16</sup> Luckenbill, 385.

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