
Guest editorial

This special issue of *Collection and Curation* on the subject of non-fiction was motivated by a long-standing desire to understand how public libraries prioritise selection in a civil society context. The lack of discussion around fundamental conceptual modalities that underpin our representation of knowledge in these spaces has prompted this exploratory collection of papers. The contributors to this issue bring a diverse range of disciplinary viewpoints that include philosophy, sociology, history, communication, education and information science. The variety of perspectives we see here, it is hoped, will help to ensure that a start is made on bringing the complexity of what we ordinarily discuss, so easily and equanimously as non-fiction, into a richer, more diverse and problematised space.

This special issue is built on the idea that a common-sense understanding of what we call non-fiction has a tendency to mask some of the important considerations that librarians should allow for when selecting and evaluating materials for public and school libraries. The authors whose work is published in this special issue have, as you will see, varied reasons for interest in non-fiction and it is through the articulation of these specific interests that we ought to be better placed to ask collection developers to look again, to revisit what underpins the apparently easily understood category of non-fiction, what does it stand for in knowledge terms and where are the tears (the weak points) in its conceptual fabric?

In their preface to Broadbeck, Gray and Metzger's *American Non-fiction*, O'Connor and Hoffman (1952, p. v) pointed out that the primary difficulty with non-fiction is that it cannot be analysed as a literary form and resists discussion in literary terms; the sheer volume of topics and the reticence of authors to look to "formal patterns of a work of literature", the ephemerality of it, all make for difficulty when assessing it as literature. O'Connor and Hoffman (1952, p. v) indicated that "some of it will undoubtedly continue to be meaningful to later generations" although this meaningfulness may be, they say, quite different to why we might read such material. Where their analysis really strikes home though is that they contend that it is only with hindsight that we might "see with any clarity what these genres and forms were". Our very contemporariness with the "issues and data discussed in them" leaves us too involved to make judgements on their "staying power as literature". O'Connor and Hoffman (1952, p. v) contended that while nineteenth-century essays were often read for their "stylistic graces" alone, the twentieth-century writer was valued for expository or data-organisation capabilities. They maintained that the influential twentieth-century non-fiction writer was less likely to have a *literary outlook* than their predecessors. The changes that they identified in twentieth-century non-fiction writing involved a move away from the "traditional assumptions about the literary essay" (p. vi). Schematic boundaries were being

broken in other ways as well, not only in biography's changed relationship to "history, social theory and literary criticism" (p. vi) but also in terms of how literature and journalism were becoming symbiotically entwined. O'Connor and Hoffman (1952, p. vi) identified new genres and forms emerging as a result of the "enormous range of non-fiction" topics finding publication (even in 1952). They asked that these various topics *not* be treated uniformly:

Each subject inevitably suggests its own appropriate treatment, and it would involve serious distortion to view all non-fiction from the same perspective or to discuss it in the same tone (p. 7).

At the 2012 Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, Richard Rhodes highlighted the problem of non-fiction as it stands as both a library and a literature term. Only coming across Rhodes's critique, once all of the papers for this issue were finalised (and in the course of writing this introduction) it was strangely satisfying to find that one is not the sole, nor the earliest, identifier of the problem. Rhodes prefers the term "verity" and rankles at how non-fiction implies that its writers and readers "dwell in the swampy depths beneath poetry and fiction's golden-lit Olympus" (cited in Getschow, 2015, p. 8). While this relative prioritisation of what we read and what we hold in collections is not the main focus of this issue, it is still worth looking to how there are deeply embedded assumptions in non-academic libraries that are yet to be properly worked out in order that the relationship between literatures – and how we choose to name knowledge (or documentary knowledge) in these popular library settings – are reasonably resolved.

While aspects of the search for ways to represent knowledge and meaning take on the character of metaphysical inquiry we do though, nevertheless, need to acknowledge the practical side of how "naming reality is, in effect, about its construction" (Deodato, 2010, p. 86). To creatively work with Joseph Deodato's discussion of Derrida and libraries for just a moment, we can see how deconstructing non-fiction is to, in a sense, "highlight the unacknowledged assumptions that govern descriptions of reality and denaturalise them" and to review the "organised form of metaphysics" that takes root when the library acts as a knowledge organising institution. It is the "ostensibly neutral or objective practices of organising information" that emerge as in need of continual critical focus.

I would like to thank all of the authors for their generous contributions to this special issue and to also express my gratitude to Steve O'Connor for the opportunity to guest edit *Collection and Curation*. A brief precis of each author's contribution is offered below.

In *Exploring engagement with non-fiction collections: sociological perspectives*, Sarah Knudson reports on case study research which looks at non-fiction reading focusing on heterogeneity in modes of reading, how non-fiction reading cultures develop and the diverse use that works can be put to by readers. Knudson looks at how non-fiction collections are used and how these help to play a role in defining how resistance to sources of power and inequality can take place, especially in community and school contexts.

Margaret K. Merga and Saiyidi Mat Roni, in *Characteristics, preferences and motivation of avid non-fiction readers*, focus on what typifies avid non-fiction book readers, specifically their demographic characteristics in relation to reading volume and frequency. Merga and Roni assess their comparative library

usage in relation to avid fiction readers and why they choose to read non-fiction. A range of factors associated with how this group reads is discussed with a special focus on what makes non-fiction reading a pleasurable activity for this reading group.

In his paper, *Reading in information behaviour and information literacy frameworks*, Andrew K. Shenton investigates how information behaviour and information literacy frameworks define the skill of reading, especially as this plays out among children and young people. Shenton's inquiry maintains that within the information behaviour/information literacy frameworks, there is an embedded belief that reading takes place either for leisure purposes or to support study and that this is an oversimplification. One of the results of such an inadequate construction is a lack of awareness within schools and libraries of why young people choose to read non-fiction.

Matthew Kelly's *Non-fiction: an unnaturally naturalised concept for collection development* seeks to problematise the basis of our use of non-fiction as an explanatory category. Kelly argues that the term's extreme simplicity masks a complex range of factors associated with common-sense understanding of life and our conceptualisation of what constitutes knowledge in civil society information environments. He seeks to open debate on how the concept of documentary knowledge can be more usefully theorised.

Laura Troiano's paper, *Thinking in space*, investigates the relationship between narrative writing and creative non-fiction and how this creates challenges for historical scholarship. Troiano surveys how space – physical and metaphorical – intersects with other scholarly and informational activities such as categorisation, curation and education, and how this ultimately impacts on narrative scholarship. She also brings out in the discussion a range of pertinent observations about what it is to write in the creative non-fiction genre and how we can understand historical narrative (which is a significant element of most public library collections) as always already a part of the landscapes within which we live and work, and not simply a partitioned realm of inquiry.

In his paper, *Exhibition and transmedia nonfiction preservation*, Arnau Gifreu-Castells looks to assess how interactive nonfiction narrative is exhibited and preserved

with a focus on documentary, journalism, museums and education. Gifreu-Castells looks at analogue and digital variations of preservation methodology through the lens of a number of different projects and proposes new ways of preserving digital non-fiction works. This paper reveals aspects of the innovative ways that non-fiction spans not only genre but also format and the ubiquitous quality of the material it covers in the digital environment.

Derek Matravers closes off the issue with his paper *Recent philosophy and the fiction/non-fiction distinction*, in which he critically investigates how we look at the distinction between narratives that work on readers' imaginations and those that contribute to the development of a worldview. Looking at the nexus between entertainment and information, Matravers discusses how the choice to engage in non-fiction reading is closer, motivationally, to similar choices that are made with regard to fiction than we sometimes concede, and that there are similar characteristics associated with narrative which affect how readers work with very divergent material. Working with the idea that fiction and non-fiction literatures impose varying levels of constraint on author and reader, an argument is made that too hard and fast a distinction between them is neither necessary nor desirable.

Matthew Kelly

References

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