

IJIDI: Book Review



Walter, V. (2020). *Young activists and the public library: Facilitating democracy*. American Library Association.

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Reviewer: Allee Monheim, University of Washington Libraries, USA

Book Review Editors: Halie Kerns, SUNY Canton, USA
Stephanie Robertson, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, USA

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The public library is central to the civic engagement of its community, but how can it be used to develop civic literacy and encourage civic engagement in its young people? Virginia Walter’s *Young Activists and the Public Library* (2020) provides an in-depth look at how public libraries can help facilitate this development and offers a resource list for collection development and programming around the topic. Virginia Walter is a veteran of public libraries, and in particular children and youth librarianship, and she brings her wealth of experience and knowledge to bear on this topic. The result is an accessible book with practical and practicable ideas for libraries to foster civic engagement and activism in their younger patrons.

The first three chapters of this book contain a wealth of information and a detailed framework for the concept of civic literacy and engagement for young people. Walter does an excellent job in dividing the concepts up by grade or age group. This feels like a very natural division and allows Walter to break down where the different age groups are at in terms of development and state standard curriculum, both of which inform what they need to get out of the programming for it to have an impact. I found these sections to be incredibly informative and applicable to my own work. Though I do not work in a public library, my work as a Public Service Librarian puts me in close contact with local middle and high schools in Seattle to coordinate research visits and field trips to Special Collections. These visits are typically centered around a history project and/or specific topic in their class curriculum, and I found discussions about how to structure activities for maximum engagement and impact to be extremely informative. I will certainly be going back to those sections when it comes time to plan these types of visits next so I can apply some of the principles outlined in these chapters.

Walter provides a list of resources at the end of chapter 2 (section titled, “Booktalks as Sources of Civic Information”) and in chapter 4 (“Resources for Civic Literacy”), and these are the sections of the book I think will be most useful for those who work in public libraries. Though Walter says the provided resources are not comprehensive by any means, these two sections provide an abundance of information that would enable any library to begin creating programming around civic engagement and/or to grow their collection on the topic.

There is one large piece of the conversation that is notably missing from Walter’s discussion of civic engagement and activism, and that is the concept of critical librarianship. Walter stresses

the importance of being a “value neutral in our presentation of information” (Walter, 2020, p. 22). It is counterintuitive to cast libraries as neutral spaces while at the same time advocating for libraries to develop programming to inspire activism and civic engagement, which are inherently partisan actions. Whether libraries or information can ever truly be neutral has been a topic of discussion throughout the profession for some time. For example, the *Disrupting Whiteness in Libraries and Librarianship: A Reading List* (Strand, 2019), maintained by University of Wisconsin-Madison, provides a wealth of resources on the topic—the earliest of which was published in 2001. Critical librarianship is not a new concept, and neither is anti-racism. Though anti-racism did not enter the common vocabulary until recently, there are many related concepts (civil rights, intersectionality, anti-discrimination, liberation, equality, etc.) that are not addressed in the theoretical portions of the book either—except to acknowledge that “the whole concept of civic engagement carries more than a hint of liberal political ideology,” before going on to warn libraries “not to overstep our bounds as providers of neutral information” (Walters, 2020, p. viii). Neutrality benefits and reinforces white supremacist culture. An institution cannot be neutral and authentically engage in activism, nor does the presence of activist programming negate an institution’s role in upholding white supremacist culture. Furthermore, speaking from my own position as a queer, Jewish woman, I find it difficult to imagine members of a marginalized community feeling at all welcome in a library with this philosophy, let alone feeling comfortable enough to engage in any activist programming.

I do feel strongly that omitting critical librarianship in the theoretical portions of this book is an oversight. But I also think it is important to highlight that this book was published in 2020. In the latter half of 2020, we have experienced a pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests, rampant police brutality, and a steep increase in hate crimes against Asian-American and Pacific Islanders (spurred on by mis/disinformation spread by political leaders). Then, 2021 opened with an insurrection. Choosing not to actively engage with anti-racism, particularly in conversations around activism, is privilege. But to say that this book was written in a different time, even if that different time was only two years ago, would be a gross understatement.

Young Activists and the Public Library is still a useful book. There is still ample information about child development and state curriculum standards, as well as good suggestions for how libraries can be partners in civic education. This information will be incredibly useful to librarians working with students in these age groups. Walter’s list of collection resources and suggested book talks is still extremely robust and covers a wide range of topics from civil rights to the environment and the content is diverse and provides many potential avenues for activism. It is flawed, but the practical sections of the book have a great deal to offer anyone looking to incorporate activism and civic engagement into their collections and programming.

References

Strand, K. J. (2019). *Disrupting whiteness in libraries and librarianship: A reading list*. University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries. <https://www.library.wisc.edu/gwslibrarian/bibliographies/disrupting-whiteness-in-libraries/>

Allee Monheim (she/her/hers) (amonheim@uw.edu) is the Public Service Librarian for Special Collections at the University of Washington. She has been working in libraries and archives for over 15 years and received her MLIS in Information Organization from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee in 2016.