Why do libraries collect in certain areas? This question is often asked—not only by patrons who visit libraries and discover unusual collections, but by colleague librarians who uncover unexpected resources within the buildings in which they have worked for many years. Such a question occurred recently at Waldo Library when a display of pop-up books piqued everyone’s attention and brought queries as to its purpose and use. One answer, “we bought a bookstore,” didn’t readily satisfy anyone, but did lead naturally to the larger question of collection philosophy.

The University Libraries, given the University’s historical emphasis on elementary education and elementary school libraries, acquired children’s books to support each phase of the institutional development. Beginning almost a century ago with the original Western State Normal School, through the expanded Western State Teachers College and the evolving Western Michigan College of Education to, ultimately, Western Michigan University with its extensive graduate and research mission, there was an emphasis on the study of children’s literature. Our lifelong goal to educate elementary and middle school teachers is part of WMU’s past and future. This goal was further enhanced when it became part of the curriculum of the Department of Librarianship in the 1940s and has continued unabated.

In Special Collections, the ongoing focus on children’s resources led to the acquisition, years ago, of an Historical Children’s Book Collection that consists, among other things, of several items from the original Children’s Collection of the Kalamazoo Public Library. One of its highlights is a complete run of first editions of Horatio Alger’s “rags-to-riches” stories for the young. (Another Children’s Collection, built on the library school’s model collection, with ongoing acquisitions, exists as a separate collection that is also located in Waldo and further supports the pedagogical rational at work in Special Collections.)

In 1998, I decided to add a couple of pop-up books to the Historical Children’s Book Collection. These were spectacular medieval castle pop-up books that would also look good in exhibitions of our other well-established medieval holdings. Another book that seemed most appropriate was Nancy Willard’s Gutenberg’s Gift (Baltimore: Wild Honey, 1995) a pop-up book illustrating the invention of the printing press; it included a pop-up version of the first press. In searching for these items, I made the acquaintance of Trevor Blake, who owned J. Whirler Books in Portland, Oregon. Ergo, Special Collections acquired its first seven pop-up books, and the world continued to turn on its axis!

We may think of pop-up books as just another variation on “engineered” children’s books and of little real significance. Indeed, the official Library of Congress subject headings guide calls them TOY AND MOVEABLE BOOKS. That was not always the case. The first such books date from the Middle Ages, and were considered objects of cosmic significance. Philosophers and theologians who sought to classify all human and divine knowledge into systems took ideas and concepts and assigned them into a lettered or numbered key. They placed groups of numbers and letters on wheels, and fitted two or more of these wheels onto the pages of manuscript books. The reader could turn one wheel within one or more other wheels on the page to combine ideas and make new ones from the resulting combinations. Working these volvelles, as the wheels were called, enabled the reader to try and seek the key to all knowledge according to the author’s system. The first author to describe this technique was the Catalan theologian and mystic Ramon Lull in Ars Magnus, 1274. He had a small but important number of successors.

The invention of printing saw the volvelles continuing to turn. Vico used them, and Leibnitz’s attempt at a universal cosmology depended heavily upon them. A large number of 16th and 17th century hermetic authors sought the secrets behind our apparent world in the spinning of such wheels. One of the most elaborate pop-up books in history was an English translation of Euclid’s Elements printed in London in 1578. Over seventy fold-up representations of the geometric shapes, which Euclid described mathematically, were included in this edition. Each fold-up shape was hand-colored so that its properties could be more easily appreciated. The complexity of these works lead to their demise by 1700. And, some of you may notice that we are now miles (or centuries) away from the acquisition of children’s books.

The application of these book-making techniques to material for younger readers came in the 19th century. Pop-ups began simply with lift-up windows on the page, like Advent calendars, from the 1820s. About mid-century, more elaborate folded constructions on pages could be pulled toward the reader to create a sort of three-dimensional effect. These are known as peep shows, and the technique is still used in the making of both children’s pop-ups and artist’s books, such as Julie Chen’s Octopus (Berkeley: Flying Fish Press, 1992).

The man who put pop-ups back on the map of publishers was a Munich author and book designer named Lothar Megendorfer. He made a series of tab books in which the tabs were pulled by readers to make figures on the page move. Just as the pistons of a steam locomotive pushed a rod which turned the wheels of a train, Megendorfer used paper structures to get his tabs to make a dancing master tap his feet and play a violin. Or, in another illustration, he had a maid polish a large mirror while the housekeeper flapped her jaw to keep the work moving along. These books were immensely popular in Germany in the 1870s and 1880s. English translations quickly appeared from London and New York, and other authors tried to equal Megendorfer’s ingenuity. From 1879, not a year has passed without the publication of ten or more pop-up books.

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So, with only a few illustrations, it can be seen that pop-up books are an important part of the history of the book as well as playing a significant role in the development of children's literature. Therefore, when Trevor Blake decided to wind up J. Whirler Books in the summer of 1999, and made his entire bookstock available, Special Collections bought a bookstore—thanks largely to the support and foresight of then Dean Lance Query and Assistant Dean for Resources Bettina Meyer. In one stroke we doubled the size of the Historic Children’s Book Collection, adding, among other things, 300 19th century children’s books, some 60 miniature books, and over 1,000 pop-up books to our holdings. Trevor also put us in touch with Jean Tyler, a Portland pop-up book collector, who wished to sell her collection. In that purchase, we added another 365 pop-ups with no duplications. In addition to adding numbers, these materials add subject strength to seven of our collections.

So what have we gained—outside of one of the larger collections of these special books in the Midwest? Pop-ups come in all shapes and sizes. What’s in the Fridge? A Tasty Pop-up ABC (Ruth Tilden, Simon and Schuster, 1994) is shaped like a wedge of cheddar. Many of these books reflect a sort of popular culture that adults perceive children want, or try to sell to them: The Bible Beasties (Babbette Cole and Ron van der Meer, London: Marshall Pickering, 1993); Everyone Hide from Wobbly Pig (Mick Inkpen, Viking, 1996); The Transformers Pop-up Book (Vic Duppa-Whyte, London: Beehive Books, 1998); and Bill Mayer’s 1994 Hypernion Books for Children title Golf-o-Rama: The Wacky Nine-hole Pop-up Mini-golf Book (with nrf golf balls and a scorecard) are among these. The books in this collection cover a wide area of subjects: dinosaurs; Christmas books; fairy tales; magic; science fiction as well as the classic Children’s Literature characters Winnie the Pooh, Dorothy, Alice, Superman, Buck Rogers, and Elvis. (Although Elvis became a fictional character only after his death and the latest supermarket “sighting.”) Some books are educational like the Halley’s Comet Pop-up Book (Patrick Moore and Heather Couper: London: Deans International, 1985) and The Story of the Statue of Liberty (Ib Penick and Joseph Porte, Runcible Press, 1986). Others appeal to children’s interests like Fenway Park: A Stadium Pop-up Book (John Boswell and David Fisher, Little, Brown, n.d.); and Flight: Great Planes of the Century (Donald S. Lopez, Viking 1985). Still others are put entertainment like Easter Bugs (David A. Carter, Little Simon, 2001) or Oh My A Fly! (Piekowski, LA: Price Stern Sloan 1989) Other books in the collection were intended for more mature audiences such as A Walk in Monet’s Garden (Francesca Crespi, London: Frances Lincoln, 1995); Kubla Khan: a Pop-up Version of Coleridge’s Classic (Nick Bantock, Viking 1994); and Jill L. Anderson and John J. Stretjan’s The Maxfield Parrish Pop-up Book (Roehnt Park, CA: Pomegranate Art, books, 1994).

Moreover, pop-ups are fun to show and exhibit. Watching the faces of people during presentations as the pop-ups are cautiously opened and put through their paces is always a joy for both demonstrator and the observers. They always establish and capture their own audience. In this academic year alone, seven classes from English, Art, Graphic Arts, and Education have made nine visits to see the pop-up books. Those visits brought over 270 people to the Libraries. Sixty-eight readers have come to use the pop-ups for assignments which range from class papers to making their own pop-up books. Another fifteen have come in for reasons that involve smiles of satisfaction. And, there is no doubt, as word of the collection spreads, that audiences will only grow over time. In fact, in a world of declining library turns, this collection, for decades, continues to increase every year.

But, in the end, the simplest and most direct response to why the University Libraries should spend money on pop-up books is also obvious: the collection supports the teaching and research missions of WMU. That, as the current television vernacular has it, is our final answer. But, if you only come because they’re fun, we’re here for you!