The Impossible Child Scholar

Crafting a Digital Exhibit with the Kerlan's Melissa Sweet Collection

EMILY MIDKIFF
Photos courtesy of the Kerlan Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, used with permission of artist Melissa Sweet.

I n those years when I simultaneously worked on a children's literature English master's degree and performed as a puppeteer and improvisational children's performer, countless colleagues commented on how those two activities must inform one another.

In reality, they rarely interacted. Children's literature scholarship, in many ways, remains isolated from experience with actual children. This distance especially pervades children's literature archives, where the pricelessness of the materials often prevents the risky touch of young hands.

In this article, I offer my experience with crafting a digital exhibit as one method of increasing children's access to archived children's literature materials. In spring 2015, I was enlisted by Lisa Von Drasek, curator of The Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota, to select and arrange the archival materials for Melissa Sweet's award-winning *Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade* into a digital exhibit.

The exhibit, titled "Balloons over Broadway, Melissa Sweet, and the Engineering of a Picturebook," was meant to depict the process of creating a nonfiction biographical picturebook that highlights parallels between Melissa Sweet's experimental creative process and the topic of engineering experimentation within the book's content. The goal was to make the content of the archive more widely accessible—especially to children. This article discusses some previous scholarly comments on children's literature archives and then moves into how I planned the exhibit as an attempt to break down those patterns. I also offer an example of how children could be guided through a complex study of children's literature, using the materials provided in the exhibit.

Why Is This New?

Children's literature archives endure a fraught relationship with the actual inclusion of children, echoing the issue within most children's literature scholarship at large. In "Unpacking the Archive: Value, Pricing, and the Letter-Writing Campaign of Dr. Lena Y. de Grummond," Emily Murphy argues that children's literature collections like the de Grummond Collection—a peer of the Kerlan Collection—are valuable to children's literature scholarship not only for their research potential, but also for historically giving value to children's literature, childhood, and children's involvement in their own literature.[1]

Murphy's most pertinent point addresses the involvement of children in the de Grummond collection as well as in children's literature scholarship: children come second. Marah Gubar notes the disciplinary "assumption that children and adults are categorically different from one another: adults are involved in

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the production of children's literature; children are not."[2] The same could be said for the scholarship and archival collecting of children's literature. Even for Dr. de Grummond, collecting was prioritized over children. Murphy writes of the librarian and collector de Grummond: "Having convinced authors of the importance of their original children's materials, she began to focus more on the ideals that had motivated her to collect archival material in the first place."[3] The ideal, Murphy states, was "making her economically valuable collection accessible to children."[4] Despite de Grummond herself reportedly wanting to include children from the start, this focus played second fiddle to years of collecting and assessing the materials.

The involvement of children in children's literature and research archives is indicative of a larger framework of idolizing children and children's materials. In *The Child, the Scholar, and the Children's Literature Archive*, Kenneth Kidd ultimately scrutinizes the scholar's interaction with the children's literature archive.[5] The difficult question he asks is whether, by holding up the value of archival research and teaching it to children's literature graduate students and as an idealistic source of information and scholarship, we continue the deceptive developmental chronology of the book-loving child growing into the obsessed collector of children's books and then "progressing" to the serious scholar.

Murphy's article discusses the sidelined inclusion of children, while Kidd's tackles the danger of removing childishness from children's literature archival work; meanwhile both articles exemplify those very trends. Even within her piece, Murphy gives precedence—and the majority of the word count—to the development and value of the de Grummond collection rather than to the topic of children. Kidd's chronology, as well, does not address the possible inclusion of the child *as* scholar. He discusses the conflation of book-loving collector and scholar, but never the possibility that a child could look at these secluded, precious materials with an emerging understanding of the research value of archived materials.

As Marah Gubar explains, "The critical story we have been telling about children's literature rules out the possibility that young people can function as artistic agents, participants in the production of culture."[6] While Gubar is more focused on the production of the books, her kinship model of childhood suggests that children can also study their own literature in a similar way to adults. This model does away with the idea that children are lesser or immensely different than adults. Instead, it posits that "children and adults are akin to one another, which means they are neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar."[7] Therefore, children should be quite capable of performing their own versions of children's literature scholarship in scholarly archives.

What I Did About It: The Exhibit

My challenge in the *Balloons Over Broadway* exhibit, then, was to bridge the gap between archives and children and make

the materials not only accessible to children, but stimulating enough to engage them in the type of appreciation and scholarly use that de Grummond would have wished for and that Kidd laments as only possible for removed and romanticizing adult scholars. My intention is not to transform children into Kidd's concept of supposedly detached scholars. Rather, the goal is to bring together an opportunity for children to combine their own sense of open wonder and appreciation with the scholar's attention to the value and analytic uses of archival materials.

To meet this goal, I needed more than just a webpage full of images. I turned to children's museum design research. Leslie Power and Jennifer Pace Robinson's "Exhibit Development with Schools in Mind"[8] is one valuable model that describes how the authors designed and tested a children's museum dinosaur exhibit with the goal of catering to both school groups and individual/family use.

While the needs of a digital exhibit are different, I found Power and Robinson's study to be useful in considering how to make the exhibit engaging to a wide range of viewers, including classrooms and young people. Power and Robinson describe many practical considerations, but one design success that stood out was their use of scattered professional "interpreters"—employees who asked questions and engaged in conversation with patrons—instead of a tour guide with prepared speeches for a series of stops.

This approach, the authors claim, increased positive reactions in both student and family groups. With this design, for example, guests "can visit in an unstructured manner and 'happen upon' interpretation instead of relying on a closed gallery and a guided tour."[9] In a digital exhibit, the nature of the design inherently includes this kind of unstructured, meandering approach to the materials; there is no linear path through the exhibit or overall tour-like narrative. Power and Robinson noted that the questions and conversations sparked by these employees directly impacted the holding power of an area of the exhibit. This approach, I thought, might better engage children in more active thinking about the materials.

Of course, I could not plant actual employees for conversations, but this led me to organize the exhibit into thematic units. I also planted "Engineer a Thought" questions on several pages of the exhibit to prompt viewers to mentally engage with the material rather than simply view it.

My organizational efforts addressed de Grummond's desire to place children in the forefront, with access to the materials. To more robustly address Kidd's distance between scholar and child, I needed to provide content that could be thought about in a substantial, scholarly way. The display needed to be ripe for real scholarly investigations by both scholars and children in order to allow children the tools to conflate the concepts of book-loving child and detached scholar.

With this in mind, I looked for topics within the materials that I thought I, as a graduate student, could pursue in a scholarly
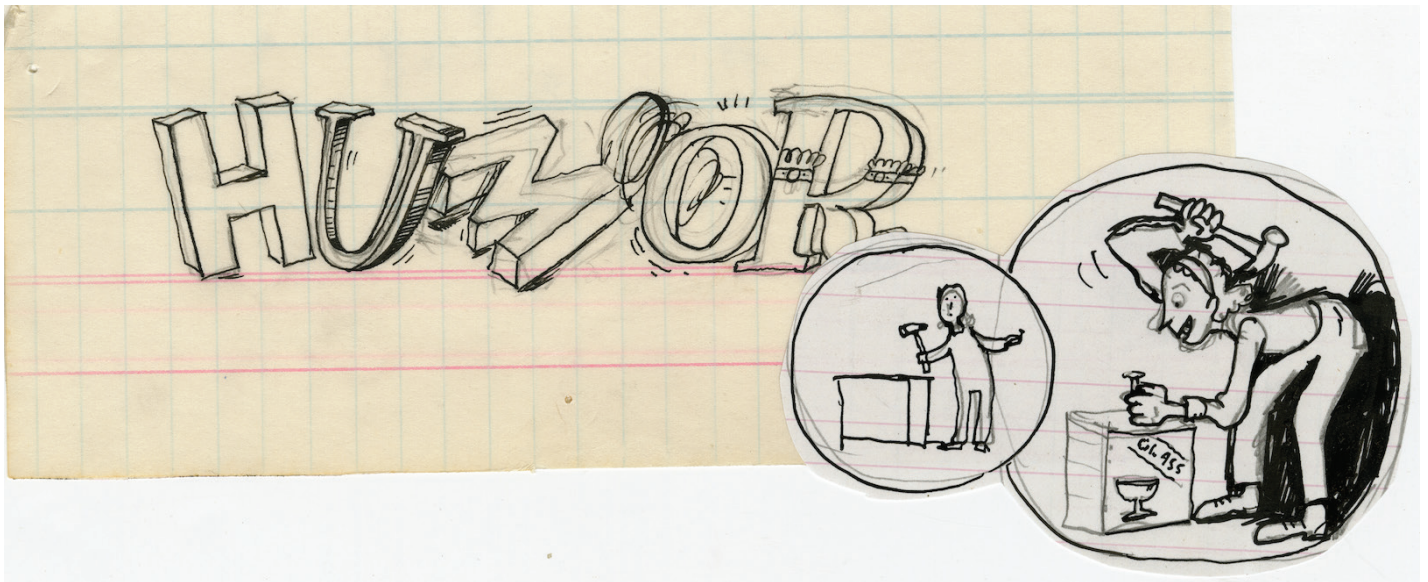
Sketch of "humor."

fashion. In other words, I used myself as a test subject for scholarly topics. I then made sure to place those materials of scholarly interest within the exhibit, and not limit it to "children's" interests. The selected materials I provided are not above the ability of children pursuing research at home, in the classroom, or a library, and they also have real scholarly interest to the field.

What You Can Do: A Case of Humor

One example of an in-depth investigation that could be pursued with children under the guidance of educators or librarians concerns Sweet's use of humor in *Balloons over Broadway*. The trial-and-error section of the exhibit includes materials about a "humor" page that Sweet ultimately dropped from the book.

The exhibit section displays how she contemplated making Tony Sarg's humor into an overt theme in the biography. This exhibit page—while at face value serving as an example of trial-and-error and as a parallel between art and engineering—can also lead to deeper conversations about what is expected and acceptable within children's literature genres—a favorite topic among children's literature scholars.

These conversations, depending upon the age group, would require guidance but could result in a rich project about themes and genres. To guide the discussion with children, the adult would compartmentalize the investigation into several phases of examination and comparison between the finished book with the draft materials.

First, of course, the child scholar would have to read the published book or have it read to them. In the final version, Sweet decided to include the humor theme subtly in the illustrations. As she explains in an interview for the exhibit, "I wanted so badly to convey that people found him humorous. He was lighthearted, whimsical and a little mischievous. But in the end, I let the art say that."[10] Sweet notes, in the same interview, a few places where
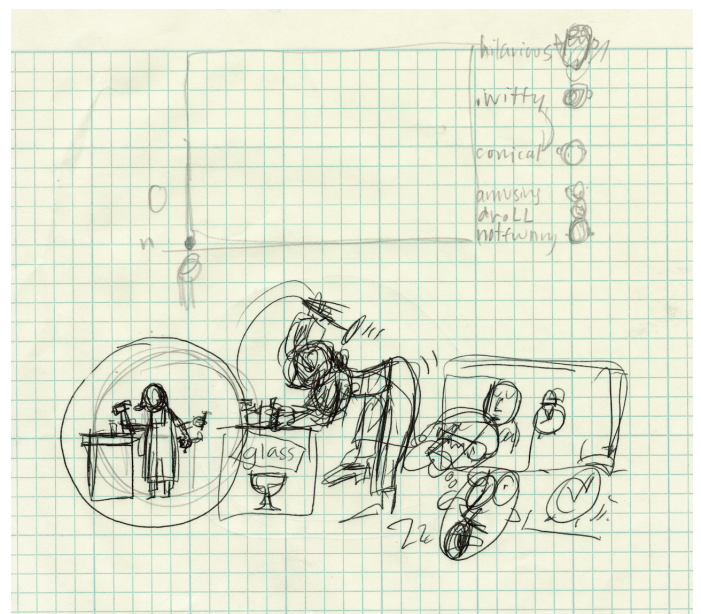
Funny rating graph.

she sees the humor reflected in the illustrations. The "Engineer a Thought" prompt on the humor page encourages the viewer to find other visual examples of humor in the book. This would be an excellent place to begin discussing humor as a theme. Older children could even read the interview for more examples of the author's perspective on humor in the book.

Interestingly, the art is the only place where the humor theme remained in the final book. The word "humor" or related words like "funny" or "silly" never appear in the published book. In fact, the text is not particularly funny at all. This would be an opportunity to have students compare the pictures to the text. They could contrast the words or sentences with the humor suggested by the pictures. At this point the guiding adult could turn the children's attention to the materials on the exhibit page. These materials contain several sketches and notes about humor, including sketches of a "laugh-o-meter" or similar
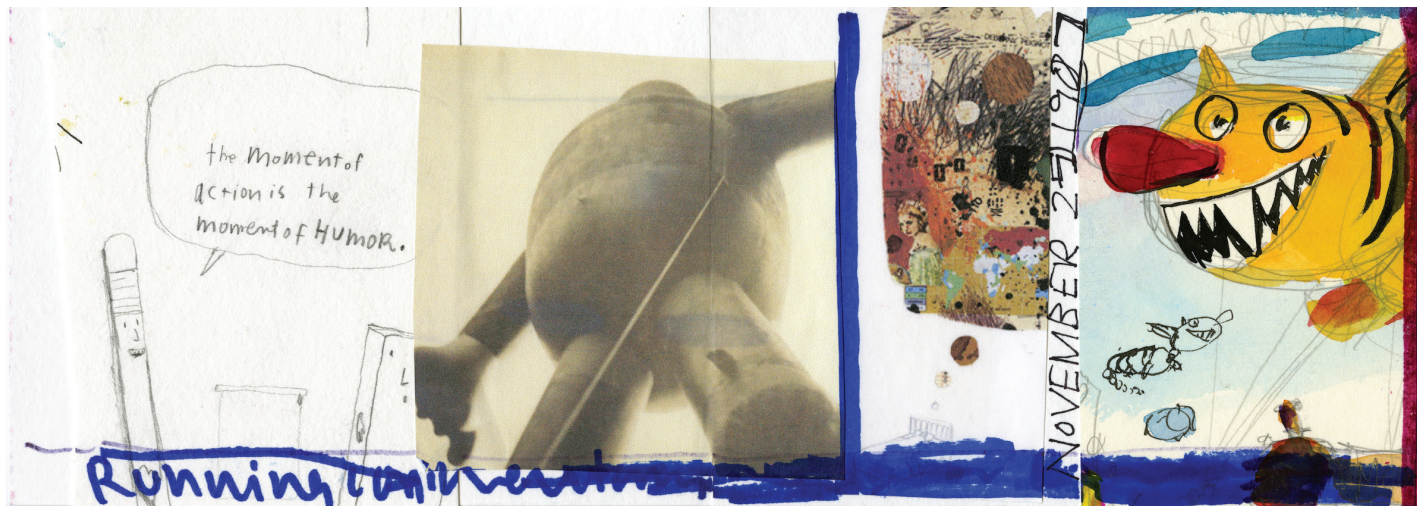
Early book dummy with humor quote.

funny-measuring devices.[11] Students could be encouraged to create their own humor-measuring graph or system and then evaluate and compare the humor in the book's pictures and words through their own metric graphic.

An analysis of two pieces of text would be another approach. In these same notes and sketches, Sweet jotted the following quote from Sarg, "The moment of action is the moment of humor."[12] Sweet did not include this quote in the final book. Instead, the featured quote by Sarg in the book is "Every little movement has a meaning of its own."[13] This choice reflects a shift from discussing "humor" in movement to discussing "meaning" in movement. Students could compare the two quotes and discuss what each of them seems to be about.

The book's working title suggests another discussion topic. The initial focus on humor was so essential to Sweet that it was reflected in one early working title: "Serious about Play: The Art of Tony Sarg."[14] This alternative title is depicted on a thumbnail sketch available on the "Life of a Page" exhibit page.

The final title, *Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade*, is far more serious. It reflects a concern with the events, the person, the truth of the matter; it directs the reader toward a journalistic focus on "who, what, when, how" questions. The working title, on the other hand, directs the reader toward contemplating how serious one is allowed to be about playing, or whether play can or should be serious. With guidance, a comparative discussion could tease out some of these differences. Especially in light of the previous investigation into humor, children would be well equipped to recognize the difference in "fun" levels between the two titles and to consider why Sweet made the choice that she did.

This humor theme intersects with the qualities of biography as a genre. Genre is a topic that many teachers begin introducing between third and fifth grades. The Common Core State Standards expect that by the end of fifth grade, students should be able to compare themes between stories of the same genre.[15] After a thorough introduction, students could consider

ABOVE: Draft of final book cover. BELOW: Final book, proudly wearing its Sibert Medal.
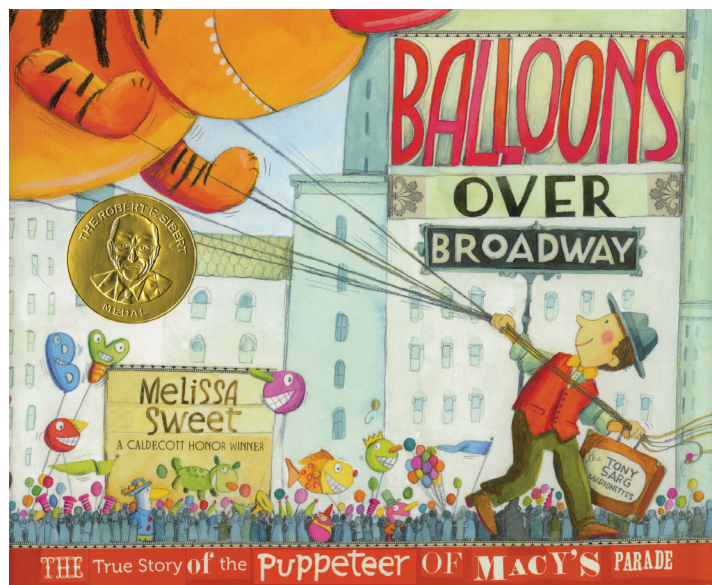
how humor and playfulness has been historically suppressed in biographical picturebooks. In 1980, Leonard Marcus commented with disappointment on "the relative lack of humor in children's picture book biographies. With certain exceptions, humorlessness has generally been the rule for such books—an instance of *un*changing values. Setting an example for the young, children's biographers seem to have agreed, is 'serious business' to be conducted accordingly."[16]

Sweet's original concept for humor completely overthrew this admittedly dated, yet relevant, complaint; her final implementation does as well, but quietly and within the interpretable arena of pictures. To her, the book differs from old biographies through the pictures. "When I was growing up," she notes in the exhibit interview, "an illustrated biography meant two photographs and maybe some black-and-white line drawings. It was really more about the words."[17] It is interesting then that she didn't put Sarg's humor in the words—the more traditional part of biographies to her—but rather in the newer and more radical picture component. This would be a fruitful arena for children to discuss what belongs in a genre and how pictures play a role in expanding or defining genre boundaries and norms.

The lesson ideas outlined above may not incorporate complex theoretical texts as one would expect from a scholar's work, but they do address scholarly topics through the use of archival materials. The materials required in order to host these discussions, from Sweet's interview comments to Sarg's quote about humor, are all available in the exhibit display.

I have tried to set the stage for children to engage in scholarly conversations *alongside* reading and loving the book however "childishly" they wish. By connecting the poles of Kidd's distinction between child and scholar, I have attempted to create a loop rather than a one-way timeline. Teachers, librarians, and other adults must take the next steps to actually enact this inclusion of children in scholarly investigations with the archival materials.

In the end, this exhibit is merely one way to approach the gap between children as the audience and children's literature archives. As another method, the Kerlan Collection invites school trips to view the materials and tour the caverns where they are stored. This is, however, a relatively rare behavior for children's literature archives. More archives may be comfortable with the option of a digital exhibit of materials.

Furthermore, not all classrooms and children are within range of an archive. Digital exhibits aimed at children and enabling

their capability for scholarly investigations can increase the accessibility for children while not jeopardizing the materials. They can also help slowly remove the perception that only emotionally removed adult scholars can appreciate and study children's literature archives. &

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