

Introduction to the history of Seven Stories and the Collection

Sarah Lawrance, Collection Director

When the Seven Stories visitor centre opened in August 2005, the organisation was already nearly ten years old. This is the mission statement of the organisation when it officially became a registered charity and company limited by guarantee in 1996.

*Mission statement of Seven Stories, the Centre for Children's Books:
To create a groundbreaking new institution of the highest quality which will celebrate the children's book and its creation and seek to enrich the nation's literary life by changing and developing public perceptions about the value and place of children's books in all our lives.*

Our co-founders were Elizabeth Hammill and Mary Briggs who began actively working to develop Seven Stories in 1996, with £10.00 in the bank. In 2007, both were awarded OBEs for services to children's literature and honorary degrees from Newcastle University. Elizabeth came from a career in social work, teaching and bookselling. Mary from a background in librarianship and schools management.

Early stages – first proposal developed 1994; conversations with authors and illustrators; formation of steering group; feasibility work; formation of partnership; development of vision.

Northern Children's Book Festival – regional strength and connections

The original inspiration for the project was an awareness that many modern British authors and illustrators of books for children felt that their work was undervalued in this country in comparison with work by writers for adults.

Such an important initiative required more than anecdotal evidence. Considerable work was needed to clarify the position and establish the case for forming a collection. A key step was to survey holdings by other institutions. The Committee found significant holdings of work by authors & illustrators in the target group in collections abroad, especially in the US.

US collections holding work by British authors/illustrators for children:
Kerlan Collection at the Research Centre for Children's Books at the University of Minnesota

de Grummond Children's Literature Research Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi

Marion E Wade Centre at Wheaton College, Illinois

Mugar Memorial Library at Boston University

Cotsen collection at Princeton University Library

Arne Nixon Center at California State University, Fresno

For example, the Kerlan Collection at the Research Centre for Children's Books at the University of Minnesota contains manuscripts / artwork by Joan Aiken, Edward Ardizzone, Pauline Baynes, Helen Cresswell, Charles Keeping, Penelope Lively, Jill Paton Walsh, Catherine Storr, Rosemary Sutcliff, John Rowe Townsend, and Brian Wildsmith amongst others. The de Grummond Children's Literature Research Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi houses work by

Quentin Blake, Jan Pienkowski, and Mollie Hunter while work by C S Lewis and J R R Tolkien is at the Marion E Wade Centre at Wheaton College, Illinois and that of Michael Bond and Rumer Godden at the Mugar Memorial Library at Boston University. The well-endowed Cotsen collection at Princeton University Library already has substantial collections of children's books and is actively considering expanding its manuscript holdings. The Arne Nixon Center at California State University, Fresno, is also rapidly expanding, and has recently added 2,000 items and books by and about Lewis Carroll to its collection. Outside the US, Toronto Public Library has some material and Brian Wildsmith has a museum devoted to his work in Izogen, Japan.

UK collections holding some work by modern British writers/illustrators for children:

Bodleian Library – Alan Garner
Brotherton Library – Arthur Ransome, Kevin Crossley Holland
John Rylands Library – Alison Uttley, Elfrida Vipont
National Library of Scotland – Joan Lingard, Mollie Hunter

Nor did the Centre wish to 'poach' work by modern/contemporary writers who have special connections to particular institutions and therefore wish to place their work there. Our claim would be simply that Seven Stories is the only UK institution to specialize in this area.

Having the outline of a collecting policy in theory is one thing – but that wasn't enough to demonstrate that the idea was actually viable.

Steering group – mixed disciplines: Kim Reynolds, Shirley Hughes, Philip Pullman, Quentin Blake, Laura Cecil, Brian Alderson, Sally Brown

Shortlisted 70 writers & illustrators & contacted them. Key message – not just the national collection, but the whole context of a centre which would celebrate their work and make it accessible in exciting & innovative ways for a wide audience. Overwhelming support from authors and illustrators made the whole project feasible.

Our policy is to collect manuscripts, artwork and related archival materials, by modern and contemporary British writers and illustrators for children. This original material is our main priority but we do also collect books. The oldest manuscripts and artwork in the collection date from the 1930s; the most recent dates from 2007 (Mick Manning and Brita Granström's artwork for *Greek Hero*). We already hold work by as many as 50 writers and illustrators, including for example:

Writers:

Joan Aiken, Peter Dickinson, Berlie Doherty, Grace Hallworth, Eva Ibbotson (local), Jan Mark, Philip Pullman (picture) Michael Rosen, Robert Westall (current exhibition).

Illustrators:

Edward Ardizzone, Angela Barrett, Helen Cooper, Robert Crowther (pop ups), Ted Dewan, Michael Foreman, Pat Hutchins, Faith Jaques, Jan Ormerod, Jane Ray etc

Much of this material has been received by donation from the authors and illustrators themselves, who are passionately committed to the success of Seven Stories. Some material has been purchased and we expect this proportion to increase in future, especially since illustrators are having a hard time financially and need to make a bit extra from the sale of their work!

The material in our collection tells the stories behind the books, often revealing every aspect from an author's first notes or an illustrator's rough sketches through to the finished work. In many cases we also hold correspondence, between writers, illustrators, editors and others, which can provide fascinating insights into the development of a text. There are rich opportunities here to engage audiences of all ages with the creative process and stimulate individual responses to the material. The Faith Jaques collection, for example (pictured here) includes notes of telephone conversations with Roald Dahl, about what the Oompa Loompas should look like.

Rapid growth of the collection presented some challenges!

First professional staff appointed in 2003, initially with 1-year project funding from HLF.

We encountered a huge documentation backlog and a lot of material which required preservation.

There was also pressure from many would-be donors for us to take in more material! Some even threatened to throw their work away if we didn't take it...

A Collection Management Plan helped to focus the work and an army of volunteers helped us to begin basic housekeeping tasks like cleaning and repackaging. By summer 2005 the core collection team had expanded to 3 and we had secured funding from NEMLAC, RWCT and Pilgrim Trust for our first archivist to set up cataloguing methodologies and establish good practice.

In Autumn 2005 we heard that Seven Stories had been awarded £288,000 by the Heritage Lottery Fund towards a project entitled *Storylines*, which combines cataloguing, preservation, digitisation and access and outreach activities - the latter building on the extensive education and outreach initiatives already carried out by Seven Stories.

Where are we now?

Accreditation

Off-site store

Collection team of 9 (3 HLF, 3 AHRC)

Flourishing partnership with Newcastle University

Future opportunities:

Acquisitions – Catherine Storr, Martin Waddell

Continuing work to embed collection work within the main programme – schools programme, also workshops and drop-ins; contributing to NCBF, DLF, etc

Future challenges:

Sustainable model of operation

Capital development

Designation