

Biscuit and Peter and George — Oh My!

Tales of a Children’s Book Doll Collector

STEPHANIE BANGE

My name is Stephanie, and I am a collector. What are my favorite things to collect? That’s easy—dolls! I bought my first Barbie when I was six years old. I was given a doll from Morocco at age seven. To this day, I continue to collect both Barbies and international dolls, but my third collection now numbers eight hundred dolls. During my first year as an elementary school librarian in 1979, I began to collect dolls based on characters from children’s books.

I wanted to add some zip and zing to class visits at my school library. The previous school librarian had plugged boys and girls into listening stations with worksheets each time they came to the library. I felt my students were missing out by not hearing fantastic tales from exotic places and visiting magical worlds of wonder.

Bottom line, I wanted them to experience the joy found within the covers of books. That’s when the first dolls from children’s books—Corduroy, Curious George, the Cat in the Hat, and Winnie-the-Pooh—found their way into my shopping basket and my storytelling repertoire.



Photos courtesy of Stephanie Bange.

I acted out Corduroy’s story by tucking the corner of his overalls so the button was hidden, then “sewing” the button back on (slyly unfolding the corner at the same time)—and *voila!* The button “magically” appeared. The kids were hooked. Then I donned a yellow hat and talked to and about Curious George,



Stephanie Bange has worked in all kinds of libraries—school, public, special, and academic—during her library career and been an active member of ALSC since 1997. She served on the 2015 John Newbery Medal Committee and is currently a member of ALSC’s Special Collections and Bechtel Fellowship Committee.

Dolls Enhance de Grummond Collection

Ellen Hunter Ruffin

I will never forget the day Stephanie Bange drove from Ohio to Mississippi in a huge U-Haul truck. Up until that August day, we had experienced a mild summer—in Mississippi terms. That day, however, was one of those hot, humid days, and I had warned the de Grummond staff to wear “sweat clothes.” I didn’t really know what we were facing, but I knew it involved unloading a U-Haul, and we needed to be prepared.

Stephanie notified us when she was ten minutes away. We gathered our student workers, other special collections staff members, and we were all waiting under the loading dock when the truck appeared. When Stephanie opened the back of the truck, we were amazed—it was completely filled with plastic containers of dolls.

“Plastic containers” doesn’t really describe what she brought. They were those Rubbermaid bins that had been carefully packed for travel. The contents were all kinds of dolls, all in mint condition, representing years of a dedicated collector’s work. Each one was a storybook character connecting to books in the de Grummond. Some came with the books they belonged to, and some came in the original containers. I was stunned by what we found.

Even more amazing was the collection’s organization. Stephanie kept records on every single doll, noting what book the doll appeared in, where the doll was purchased, how much it cost, and the date purchased.

I have met many collectors over the years and have seen well-kept records, but Stephanie’s record-keeping topped them all. She had essentially done our job for us.

Of course, we *did* need to accession the dolls to see if the records agreed; they did. Our job is to sort, to organize, and to arrange donations in all conditions. But she had done the organization for us; we simply needed to decide how we would house them in an archival-safe manner and how they would be stored.

Some of my favorites in the collection were the anniversary-edition *The Lonely Doll* by Dare Wright, the Curious George Barbie, all the *Hunger Games* books and dolls, along with the *Twilight* characters—all eye-catchers, especially for traditional college students. Stephanie had even collected the Happy Meals that highlighted L. Frank Baum’s *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* characters.

Since the donation has been with us for a year, we have used the dolls in many exhibits, such as during Banned Books Week and the holiday season.



Stephanie Bange, left, and Ellen Hunter Ruffin

The University of Southern Mississippi has several colleges that connect to the de Grummond Collection. Along with the School of Library and Information Science, the School of Education offers a children’s literature course for preservice teachers and childcare workers. The Bange Doll Collection adds to the experience in those classes.

The dolls also enhance the college’s graduate program in children’s literature. Fifty years from now, the dolls and books will be considered historic and will contribute immeasurably to the study of children’s literature.

It should be noted that our collection doesn’t generally collect dolls. Our focus is on American and British children’s books and original artwork and papers of the creators. But this collection adds to our holdings in a unique manner.

I often say we are a “library with museum tendencies,” which is true of most children’s literature collections. Stephanie’s gift is something that will complement our holdings, and there is no end to what it will augment.

The best part of the donation is that Stephanie still has the collecting bug. She has a most-wanted list, and we at the de Grummond wait patiently for her to complete her collecting!

Ellen Hunter Ruffin is an Associate Professor and Curator of the de Grummond Children’s Literature Collection at The University of Southern Mississippi. Ruffin served on the 2009 John Newbery Medal Committee and the 2015 Wilder Award Committee, and is currently serving as the Councilor for the State of Mississippi on the ALA Council.

relating stories of his many adventures to my young listeners . . . well, you get the picture.

I began to seek out other dolls featured in storybooks and used them when storytelling, reading books, and setting up displays in both the school and public libraries. Before the internet, I combed the shelves of toy stores in Rhode Island and Ohio until I finally owned all seven of the vinyl *Babysitter's Club* dolls.

Imagine my delight in 1993 when I discovered a small company named MerryMakers was manufacturing dolls based on children's books! Then, in 1995, another company, YOTTOY, also began to manufacture dolls from children's books. Searches became more focused as I scoured high-end department stores, toy stores, bookstores, and conferences looking for dolls from these two niche companies and a few others. Not that this collection became an obsession, really; rather it was an extension of my love of children's books and sharing them with others.

In 1995, I displayed most of my doll collection at work, in the children's room of the Portsmouth (RI) Free Public Library. It was so well received that I left the display up until I moved to work at Dayton (OH) Metro Library.

After settling into the new workplace, I missed not seeing and sharing my collection with all my young reading friends, so I once again put them on display, arranging them alphabetically by author and hanging them on the wall above the section of shelving where their books would be found. Readers found *Curious George* hanging over the books by H. A. and Margret Rey, *Biscuit* was at home near the books by Alyssa Capucilli, and *Strega Nona* hovered over Tomi DePaola's books. When I transferred to a different branch, the dolls came down from the walls of the old building and immediately went up in the new one. Once again, they made a ring around the room that delighted both youngsters and grownups.

I discovered this last group of admirers quite by accident. When taking them down in preparation to work at Wright State University, a mother asked me, "Where are you taking *our* dolls?"

At Wright State University, I did not have a place to share my collection. Although I was still actively adding to the collection, they were packed away, carefully stored in air-tight boxes in my basement.

During a tour of the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi in 2011, Ellen Hunter Ruffin was showing the group some of Ezra Jack



From left, MerryMakers' President Clair Frederick, Ellen Hunter Ruffin, and Stephanie Bange.

Keats's materials that they were setting up for a museum show in New York. I remarked that I had two Peter dolls that would have fit into the display nicely—and a light bulb went on in my head. I asked Ellen if the de Grummond might be interested in my doll collection, and she said yes.

In August 2016, I delivered the collection of more than 750 dolls, driving them down to the de Grummond collection in a U-Haul truck after spending my summer catching up on cataloging them (yes, I documented each doll and have copies of many receipts in six four-inch binders) using the same crude means (handwritten notes with photos pasted in) I employed since I set it up as a collection. Just before I dropped them off, I added a rare *Rotten Ralph* doll that had eluded me for years, and I'm still on the hunt for a *Rhinos Who Surf* doll.

MerryMakers' President Clair Frederick has been following my collection for the last ten years or so, watching it grow. I have been working closely with her as she realizes the importance of the collection to the history of children's literature and wants to ensure that as many of their dolls as possible are included in this collection.

In April 2017, I drove my car back down to Mississippi to attend the Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival with approximately fifty more dolls to add to the collection, though I am still on the hunt for that elusive *Rhinos Who Surf* doll. Now that the dolls are ensconced at the de Grummond, I plan to continue building the collection in the future because I have not completed it yet. After all, I *am*, first and foremost, a collector! 🐾