

Imaginations and Imaginary Glass

Building an American Girl Doll Collection for Everyone

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In the late 1990s, my mom took me on the train to downtown Chicago for an experiential birthday. Now nearly three decades from that afternoon at the American Girl store, with my eager eyes staring beyond the glass display at Samantha, I realize that many did not have a similar experience growing up. However, I could not have foreseen that the beloved dolls of my childhood would become a major part of my career as a youth services librarian or be part of a larger trend towards Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives within public libraries.

After restructuring at the Fox River Valley Public Library District in East Dundee, IL, moved staff to our branch location, Randall Oaks, on the opposite end of the library district in Sept. 2021, our American Girl Doll collection—some of the most popular kits within our Library of Things—became my new collection management responsibility, along with my existing collections areas of board books and beginning readers.

As the third librarian to manage this collection after its debut along with our STEAM kits during May 2018, my overhaul of this beloved collection for our patrons was three-fold:

- moving away from classic dolls to better align with our updated diversity, equity, and inclusion service model by releasing exclusive dolls unique to our library complete with their own stories of overcoming personal challenges,
- transforming our collection into the same eager-eyed experience I had growing up by reducing the imaginary “glass” of any monetary barriers which could inhibit access, and
- making the imaginary “glass” of our display better reflect the ethnicities, interests, and life experiences of those we serve.



American Girl dolls have proven a well-received addition to the Library of Things.

My first reaction was to export our available circulation data to see which dolls were popular and which were not, at each of our locations, and how many dolls we were currently circulating. Given the fact that there would be less than half a dozen on the shelf at our main library at any given time, it didn't occur to either me or my colleagues that we currently owned almost fifty American Girl kits back in 2021; as the only CCS Libraries Consortium member amid twenty-nine northern Illinois libraries to do so.

Our library district currently includes eight culturally and monetarily diverse, as well as widespread, towns and villages, encompassing a service area of over seventy-one thousand patrons



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(54% White, 37% Hispanic/Latinx and 7% Asian). Since then, I have received questions from colleagues at neighboring libraries regarding our best practices in building and maintaining our collection, and our Library of Things in Youth Services has grown to ninety-eight kits with fifty-four American Girls and Bitty Babies, along with numerous STEAM and Early Learning activities. These kits have circulated 5,421 times since their debut in May 2018, with our American Girl Doll kits circulating just over three thousand times as of July 2023.

The Transition to Equitable Access

Despite my enthusiasm for sharing the uniqueness of our American Girl Doll kits with our community of patrons, I began to realize the shortcomings of purchasing, cataloging, circulating, and maintaining a collection of this complexity and size, not to mention balancing the whiteness of our current collection with our fiscal budget and the options available from toymaker giant Mattel.

From my place behind the reference desk, I began to make a mental note of who was using our library and how I could use library funds to create a greater representation of our community. Combined with our collection's circulation statistics, I could easily see that our Hispanic and Latinx dolls were some of the highest circulating amid our collection, including our new Hispanic

male doll, along with our fitness and technology interest dolls. However, our Asian and Middle Eastern populations who actively use our library were unfortunately not being represented.

Shelf Space Limitations

Aided by these statistics, I realized two additional problems; our collection had a relatively narrow range of offerings when compared to available options by Mattel, and we were running low on available shelf space, especially at our branch. After our restructuring, the manager of our branch informed me that due to limited space, we had to transfer several American Girl Doll kits to our main library.

I pulled six of our lowest circulating dolls, turning our main library and branch collections into a 4:1 ratio, which gave our dolls a new life by providing patrons who are more likely to checkout kits from our Library of Things with greater access, and created significant shelf space at our branch. I also noticed that our collection featured duplicate dolls, and sometimes but not always, these kits included overlapping similarities in their contents, making inventories a challenge to track and maintain due to the frequency of lost or damaged accessories. I quickly realized that our library system only needed a maximum of two of the same doll, one at each location, featuring unique accessories.

Shifts In Circulation

In October, administration and our library board decided to simplify checkout loan periods across most materials types, including our Library of Things, allowing for three weeks with two autorenewals as long as a hold is not placed, with a maximum of three kits per card. While this change was a noticeable improvement in access, it also came with the equally large limitation; that our dolls could only be checked out by FRVPLD cardholders moving forward.

Having several families come in and have the dolls they checked out last week suddenly become inaccessible broke my heart, and I had to create signage and become the point person and professional listening ear to numerous complaints. Yet I saw patron concerns both ways, as many of the patrons who vocalized their complaints were reciprocal borrowers from higher-income neighboring library districts, the intended purpose of this collection remains to serve those who would otherwise not have access to these prohibitively expensive dolls.

The Need for Greater Representation

As I placed our new signage, I realized I could make the largest impact by offering better marketing with interior and exterior labeling of our kits. I had just designed two new exclusive dolls—Mei Lin Wei, an Asian American and her Chocolate Lab Bao, a trained diabetic service dog, who highlights the importance of teamwork; and Amara Ayad, a Muslim American and hijab-wearing fitness enthusiast, who tackles anxiety by practicing mindfulness.

To my surprise, our American Girl Doll kits had never been featured on our social media channels, and I thought this was the perfect time to enlist our new PR staff. As I dressed the dolls for their debut with new cover and inventory labels inspired by the colors of the American Girl logo, our marketing department featured the dolls on our social media channels; posing them to highlight their unique personalities which were accompanied by short bios I wrote to share their personal stories with our patrons. These dolls quickly became ambassadors of our Library of Things collection and were a massive hit which helped fill the immediate need for broader community representation.

Becoming Unstuck

While our original cover labels were lacking the excitement I felt with my first doll, the real problem was that the essential information about our dolls and their contents featured small fonts, inventory labels formatted as paragraphs, and nondescript accessories, all described differently on various labels. In addition, the dolls themselves often outlasted their accessories, and the purchase of replacement accessories was not originally considered. The current system of crossing off lost or damaged accessories in permanent marker looked unprofessional, was inefficient as

both the outside and inside labels needed to be updated, and weakened staff arguments that patrons were responsible for the condition of our kits until their return to the library. Yet addressing these challenges properly was going to take significantly more time than I expected.

Removing the many layers of sticker paper from the outside and inside of our plastic containers took up to thirty minutes to soak, scrape, and remove the existing labels, with the addition of creating and laminating new cover, side and inventory labels. Multiply this process by more than fifty kits, made making necessary updates to our existing collection quite a challenge.

Planning for Repairs

With kits costing anywhere from \$110 to \$250 each, our budget for the collection between our main library and branch location stood at \$2,000 for several years. With continued advocacy, I have been granted additional funding for the 2023-2024 fiscal year, meaning that the many conversations with our Public Services Manager about how to best maintain our collection made a clear difference and have affected how we have handled our American Girl Doll kits since the fall of 2022.

With support from administration and our library board, it was decided that an increased budget would ultimately facilitate an increase in access, rather than the need to impose strict policies that would subject our patrons to a potential financial burden, especially for families who already perceive our kits as being too expensive due to the high potential for loss or damage. With our increased budget our approach remains—replacement accessories will continue to be purchased, and we will recatalog our kits as needed when they cannot, until damage requires the dolls to be withdrawn.

While our kits are checked in by hand by Youth Services staff against their inventory labels each time they are returned, the tiny accessories are, by nature, easily susceptible to loss and damage. For this reason, each quarter, I personally check each of our kits for damage and staff errors. Over time my spreadsheet from my first export of circulation statistics has evolved, becoming color coded—including the date of each kit's last quarterly check, its location, barcode, an image of each accessory within a specific kit, and a notes section for accessories, both lost and those which have been purchased as replacements, since the kit's initial release.

Due to the frequent need for replacements, I often have several American Girl Doll kits under my desk, along with an entire filing cabinet of replacement parts. While most accessories can be replaced, others are only able to be purchased with the initial doll or have since been phased out by Mattel. This requires our library as a best practice to purchase our new dolls with a set of accessories to include within each kit upon its release, along with two replacement sets to hold onto for future needs.

Staffing Demands

Our collection has greatly improved over time, although I always view my work with our American Girl Doll kits as any collection development responsibility—as a constant work in progress—and I’m always looking for new ways to make our collection less of a burden for our staff of two librarians, four library assistants, and three clerks.

One of my next goals is to release a third generation of our American Girl Doll kits that will include:

- Pictorial and written inventories in both English and Spanish with images provided by Mattel, as an experiment to reduce the likelihood of lost accessories, by providing a visual checklist for patrons and staff amid our Spanish speaking community,
- Purchasing a greater number of Bitty Babies, Hispanic and Latinx, male and non-gender conforming, and technology interest dolls to better align with the ages, ethnicities, interests, and life experiences of the patrons who access our collection,

- Providing a choking hazard warning and a zippered mesh pouch for families to place small pieces they don’t wish to be lost or handled inside for safe keeping, and
- Improving the signage of our display to feature age suggestions as advertised by Mattel for both Bitty Baby and American Girl Doll kits.

Although our library and its Library of Things have experienced a great amount of change over the past several years, the future for our American Girl Doll kits—and equally the future of public libraries in moving toward greater EDI efforts—remains bright. With plans to provide greater signage, clearer labeling, and an increased number of inclusive dolls, we will continue to expand access in the coming years to provide the next generation with an improved, yet still eager-eyed experience, where they’ll be able to reach beyond the imaginary “glass” and see themselves amid a more inclusive world. &

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