The Importance of Social Stories

How Museums Are Portrayed in Children's Literature

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A class walks into a museum—they are shushed, corralled, and chastised, and then a statue comes to life, or the class clown wanders off on their own. This could be the beginning of any number of children's books set in museums.

When the reader of that book goes on their first field trip to a museum, what do they expect? Do they enter worried that they're going to trip the alarm and go to jail? Do they leave disappointed that the pictures don't talk? The use of children's literature as social story provides unique opportunities for readers and educators of all types to set up cultural experiences, but a survey of museum representation in children's picture books found that set up to be lacking when it comes to what modern museum experiences are being curated for children.

As an educator working in a school that prioritizes social stories, I look to picture books that can prepare my students for not only the future, but the present. I look for stories about libraries that make the library a welcoming space—I do not choose to read books about kids who get shushed in libraries or get threatened over late fees. When you choose a book about going to the dentist, do you want one where a kid has a terrible experience? Even though we know there are ranges of experiences, we choose picture books as social stories for authentic, ultimately positive outlooks. We bring back the book late, we get a cold compress after the dentist, and we understand better what is expected of us.

When I created an annotated bibliography of children's book representations of museum visits—especially in illustrated titles—I found a lot of *Night at the Museum* shenanigans, bored kids wandering off, and finger-wagging chaperones. What was that setting kids up to experience in these cultural havens, and what was it teaching when it came to representation? Why were serendipitous revelations of the importance or relevance of museums saved for portraiture while class clowns fell silent in the face of dinosaur bones? What impact did these stories have on the ability of these books to serve not only as social stories, but also mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors?

Some of the books I studied included picture books, easy readers, early chapter books, and nonfiction titles. They ranged from simple readers with simple sentences to full-length nonfiction accounts of particular art exhibits, but the bread and butter became the picture books that focused on childhood experiences in museums, particularly first visits. I looked for diversity in the books I read, both in the protagonists but also the museum staff. Here are a few of particular interest in regards to picture books as social stories.

***Anna at the Art Museum* by Hazel Hutchins and Gail Herbert, illustrated by Lil Crump. (Annick Press, 2018).**
A young girl is terribly bored at an art museum and is constantly chastised when she tries to entertain herself and engage with the art and patrons. When she sees a Cassatt painting of a bored girl in a backroom, she realizes that there's more to the paintings around her. But the day has been long, and she and her mother soon leave with the promise to come back. This is more of a picture book about the expectations kids might have of what a museum day is like and how art may subvert that, which could be paired with a text showing more engaging activities for kids at a museum. The art included throughout is a treat for the viewer.

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***Harvey Moon, Museum Boy* by Pat Cunningham. (Aladdin, 1994).**
In this *Night at the Museum*-style picture book, a Black boy takes a class trip to the museum and brings along his lizard. When the lizard escapes, he chases him through the museum and ends up hiding until after the museum closes. When he comes out, he sees the museum come to life—including Greek statues stealing food from paintings. As Harvey escapes, he becomes famous and gets a movie deal. This is not as instructive about museums as you might want for such an exciting tale that will appeal to readers, but it does scratch the "what happens after hours" itch and allows the imagination to drive the discussion.

***Simon at the Art Museum* by Christina Soontornvat, illustrated by Christine Davenier. (Atheneum, 2020).**
Simon and his family visit a Metropolitan Museum of Art-esque museum, and Simon is bored and wants cheesecake. But when he sits back and watches people engaging with art, his world opens up. With beautiful, sweeping illustrations that capture movement and shape well, this book talks about museum etiquette of being quieter, shuffling feet, not chasing or running or waving our hands, but still invites a child to see the beauty around them and themselves in the art.

***Parker Looks Up* by Parker and Jessica Curry, illustrated by Brittany Jackson. (Aladdin, 2019).**
A young Black girl, her mother, and her sister visit the Smithsonian Museum of American Art and see an array of beautiful pictures that make them feel excited, and then Parker is stopped in her tracks by the portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama. This is a beautifully illustrated, diverse book about the importance of representation in museums and showcases Parker and her friend Gia playing dress up in the museum and dancing, which shows how inviting museums can be towards younger visitors and validates that museums are places of exploration and play in relationship to the artifacts and art.

***Zach and Lucy and the Museum of Natural Wonders* by the Pifferson Sisters, illustrated by Mark Chambers. (Simon Spotlight, 2016).**
Two siblings make a natural history-inspired museum in the basement of their big city apartment building in this easy reader. After reading about the Natural History Museum, the siblings collect "specimens" including moss, pellets, and dead bugs from outside and donations—including a stuffed parakeet and a peacock fan from their neighbors—to create a "museum of natural wonders" that finally excites the neighbor who always looks at kids with disdain. While not about a "real" museum, this book encourages kids to see a museum in natural elements and shows the kinds of samples that might not be the flashiest artifacts in the museum.

After compiling this research, I felt a bit inspired, but a bit defeated. I didn't have the perfect social story of a museum book to hand to my teachers before a field trip or to plan programming around when partnering with a museum. The five I shared stuck out as social stories, but I could have listed a dozen other examples of kids being dragged around museums, bored out of their mind until they see something off the beaten track.

In my research, I found great examples of diversity and the power of art, and I had funny mysteries and great examples of kids discovering the magic of dinosaur bones, but did museums seem accessible in the majority of these stories? No. Did traditional museums in these stories serve children as their audiences as equally as they served adults? Rarely.

I knew there were children's museums, but I struggled to find those represented in children's literature. Instead, the usual suspects appeared time and time again—art museums, natural history museums—and they were presented as a cavernous expanse of opportunity to get in trouble. I found gender disparity; boys were more likely to be the ones getting in trouble in museums, while girls were more likely to see themselves represented in art. I saw emerging trends in diverse protagonists, but not in diverse art and staff representation in the museum space. I was intrigued by what I had found, but I wanted to take the next step.

Visiting in Person

I interviewed the curator of education and the coordinator of museum engagement and outreach at the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Museum in Washington, DC, to get their take on how museums of today welcome children into their spaces and what they wish children's literature was teaching kids to expect about museums.

The DAR Museum collects, preserves, and interprets objects used and created in American homes; it welcomes many class groups and scout troops; there's often a stroller parked in the lobby, a docent on duty, and a programming plan being printed upstairs.

This museum, which features thirty-one period rooms of homes ranging from the late seventeenth century through the 1920s, is not what one might think of when they think of a museum that welcomes kids because rooms include a lot of china dinnerware, pretty wallpaper, quilts, and books. Each room captures the American home in a particular period—such as an 1810s parlor, a historic kitchen, a 1780s study—but the museum does regular children's programming.

What would museums like to see in children's literature geared towards children's first visits?

"We had second graders through middle schoolers here recently as part of the Coalition for African Americans in the Performing Arts, and I find that the thing that ends up being the most disruptive is the adult participation in general," said Kevin Lukacs, curator of education. "Sometimes they'll directly contradict not just museum content, which is fine, I can address that strategically, but also methodology. So, we're in the Study Gallery, I'm just about to tell them they can open the drawers, and they're freaking out telling the students not to open the drawers. They frighten the children just as we're about to open them up. They want them to have their library voices on in the museum, but we don't need library voices."

Lukacs and Sarah Kirspel, who works in engagement and outreach, also highlighted that the museum wants youth to see museums as places where there are things relevant to their lives. The DAR Museum, for example, has an entire room that is a display of historic children's toys. Having common childhood items as valuable museum pieces helps children understand that museums are for and about them as well.

How do you engage with children's groups and child visitors strategically in a museum not inherently made or advertised for children? How do you structure that introduction?

The museum has historically worked with scout troops to host badge-earning programs, field trips, craft afternoons, engagement with historic toys, and more. Recently, the museum has added more educators to their team to help better facilitate those programs, but they still have a few methods in place to ensure success.

"Student-led learning guides the process, even the museum rules. We don't list them, we ask them what they think the museum rules are, and then we facilitate that discussion. They'll be very specific, like don't spit on the object," Lukacs explained. "We literally throw play into there too sometimes! If we're talking about not wandering away, or we have a really wiggly group, we see that and we have to get our wiggles out. I might say, "just wiggle with me," and I also do vocal warm-ups with the kids and incorporate screaming. When I introduce the kids to the idea of museum voice, I ask how quiet they can be, how loud they can be, I might use a vocabulary word that we say really loud and really soft, giving them a spectrum. Having more physicality with the lesson is important."

"With the scouts, I also tell them all the things we're going to do. We're not going to look at that now, we're doing this now, but we'll come back to this. It is really easy to lose them," Kirspel added.

This benefits not only the children but also the chaperones who might see something that interests them as well, or wonder what is happening next.

"Chaperone modeling is something we don't talk about, but we should," Lukacs said. "You might have things to share with your students to prepare them—content and social skills—but there needs to be materials for the chaperone, what's expected of you. I think a lot of people are unprepared for what chaperoning a museum experience can look like."

There are other more physical things in the museum that make it more child-friendly. These features not only provide multi-age accessibility, but also a sense of security for caregivers who might be afraid themselves of getting in trouble if their child breaks something or goes past a certain point.

"The gates are clear," Kirspel points out, referencing the wooden gates that welcome visitors into every period room. These plexiglass gates allow the visitor to see into and lean into the room without fully stepping in. The gates are about three- to four-feet tall in each of the period rooms and vary in depth into the room.

"They didn't used to be," Lukacs pointed out. "They used to be wooden slats–super inaccessible. They redid them all to be plexiglass, so you could see through and lean on them," which allows visitors who might be shorter to still have full visual access to the artifacts inside the room. "The idea that a toddler can lean against the plexiglass . . . that's really important."

The DAR Musweum now hosts Family Days, which are afternoons designed to invite families with younger children into the museum for curated activities. How do you design those?

"We've been doing them for just over a year. The family day activities are based around the priority of play and positive associations with museums. You can bring your kid here for free, and they're going to have a fun time," Lukacs said. "They're not going to break anything!"

"Let them play–when we pull out games, I'm saying, I'm an adult, I work here, I'm telling you I'm going to play this game. But there was often a hesitation to explore the rest of the museum," he explained. The family day activities usually begin in the O'Byrne Gallery, a large empty ballroom-type space often used for weddings. "So how do we make sure they know the whole building is their safe space?"

"We made some activities," Kirspel adds, "that encourage them to explore the museums—like seek and finds, I Spy games, etc."

"We find it's also helpful for adults," Lukacs chimes in. "No, you don't have to explore this big intimidating museum, just go look at this table." The I Spy board invites participants to find particular items around the museum like a leech jar, an old teddy, and more.

Going Forward

What would a social story-inspired picture book about visiting this museum look like? It might start with a sound game, with play, with yelling the word "ARTIFACT," or whispering the words *period room*. It might demonstrate leaning against the plexiglass gates to show how to get a better look at wall art, or a certain piece of weird china that you've never seen before like an oyster plate. It might include kids exploring kids' toys, looking at old teddy bears and slate globes and being glad their seats are not so rigid. It might show kids designing their own quilt blocks using pattern blocks or watching a restoration artist hand-paint gilding on the wall.

When you read picture books this year, think about what social stories they are teaching youth readers. What expectations are they setting? What are they assuming about the reader, and about the setting? Social stories are increasingly used in education settings—I hope to see more usage of picture books in this field. &