

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

May 4, 1949 (catalog date)

Description: In this segment, ER interviews Helen Ferris, director of the Junior Literary Guild

Participants: ER

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. Today I should like to introduce my friend Helen Ferris, the director of the Junior Literary Guild. It's nice to see you, Miss Ferris and to talk with you about the subject of children's books. I'm sure that most of our listeners are familiar with the Literary Guild. But perhaps some of them are not so familiar with the work of the Junior Literary Guild. Would you explain about the Guild and what it does, Miss Ferris?

[Helen Ferris:] The Junior Literary Guild uh really um works like the Literary Guild in that we select one book a month for each of our young members. But our members are from six to sixteen years of age so naturally we have to have four books. The first book is for six, seven, and eight year olds --the picture books for little children. There we spend a great deal of time looking at the pictures that are planned as well as reading the stories because pictures, for small children, are just as important as the story itself. Our next group is for nine, ten, and eleven year old readers. We have a book for them every month. Then when it comes the early teens we divide. Girls from twelve to sixteen get their books one each month and boys from twelve to sixteen get theirs. Publishers of the country submit manuscripts to us many months before they are published. For instance we have just finished our selections, making those selections, for the fall of this year. We're very proud that for all the twenty years of our existence -- we'll be twenty years old in June -- we have had a most helpful and distinguished editorial board and Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt has been a member of it from the first. The other editors are Mrs. Sidonie Gruenberg of the Child Study Association, Mr. Angelo Patri, the well-known educator, and recently appointed Mr. Albert B. Tibbets who is very active in the Boy Scouts movement. The books themselves are sent to children in their own homes and the children call them surprise packages. Then we also have school and library members. And bit by bit our membership has grown over the twenty years until now we go into every state in the United States, we have a special headquarters in Canada and recently when we checked, we discovered to our great delight that Junior Literary Guild books go every month to every continent around the world. Some of the native schools uh take the Junior Literary Guild to help in their English work. For instance in France, for many years we've had a private school as members-- we get letters from the boys and girls, uh this membership was interrupted during the war but now they're back again. And down in South America, in Peru, we have a very active school membership and those letters are great fun. Uh I think every child in the school wrote to us one month and said that they all wanted to write to boys and girls in this country, so we arranged for one of the pen pal organizations to uh plan for children in the United States to whom each one of those children that could write. We try to have as many different kinds of good books as we can in the course of the year. Uh if you ask any child, oh, say a child ten years of age what he likes or what she likes, they may say a mystery story, they may say a dog story, and that will be all. But children uh haven't as yet discovered what they really do like, so one of our functions, we feel, is to find as many different kinds of good books in the course of the year as we possibly can. And we get such interesting letters. I remember one from a young girl we had sent out-- I think that month it was a biography of Mary Mapes Dodge, the famous editor of St. Nicholas in other days --and this girl wrote to us said, "I've always been bored by biography but when I got my surprise book this month I discovered it was very interesting. And I've been reading biography ever since." It's quite amazing the uh kinds of books that are being written on informational subjects these days. Almost anything I think is interesting to young readers if it can be brought to them uh in their own terms and so that they can comprehend it.

[ER:] That interests me very much because I can remember when I was young that we had some rather dreadful books that we read [both laugh], such as the Elsie books, and I'm glad that children are being given good books. What would you uh think made a good children's story?

[Helen Ferris:] Well of course there are certain uh qualities that we all feel belong to any good book whether written for children or for adults: the qualities of good writing, of characterization, of vivid background if it is a story. But with children, you know Mrs. Roosevelt, our first question that we ask about the manuscripts that come in-- we've discussed it many times-- our first question doesn't have to do with those literary qualities. It's, "Will this book be interesting to boys and girls".

[ER:] That's a very good criterion, Miss Ferris. Thank you so much for being our guest today and now back to my daughter Anna in Hollywood.

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s): 80-5(58)

Transcription: Emily Whaley
First edit: Anna Karditzas
Final edit: Christy Regenhardt

The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project