Anime club in the public library: case study

Anime klub v splošni knjižnici: študija primera

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Abstract

Aim: The popularity of Japanese animation (anime) has increased worldwide in recent years. The paper aims to represent an anime club as an opportunity for public libraries to draw in young fans by offering them a place where they can exchange experiences and find like-minded peers. It reflects on the definition of anime and the reasons for its popularity, offers an insight into possible ways of using anime in public libraries and presents a case study of a successful anime club.

Methodology: This case study investigates the role of an *Anime Club for High Schoolers* in attracting an often hard-to-reach user group of adolescents back to public libraries. The observed anime club is specific for adopting a book club structure. To answer the questions how and why this worked, data had been collected through archival record research and observation with participation during two program years (from October 2021 to July 2023).

Findings: Despite the difficulties due to epidemiological measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, 20 teenagers joined the club: 7 individuals per session on average and 8 adolescents regularly attending meetings held twice a month. During the second year, even more participants regularly attended individual meetings. The club managed to gather an interested, engaged and positive community, whose members then started participating in other library programs.

Applicability: The work showcases anime clubs as effective and valuable means for public libraries worldwide to attract young fans by offering them a place to cultivate their interests. It can serve librarians as an incentive for the development of a similar activity.

Keywords: adolescents, young adults, anime, anime club, case study, public library

Izvleček

Cilj: Priljubljenost japonske animacije (anime) se je v zadnjih letih povečala po vsem svetu. Namen prispevka je predstaviti anime klub kot priložnost za splošne knjižnice, da pritegnejo mlade oboževalce, tako da jim ponudijo prostor, kjer si lahko izmenjajo izkušnje in najdejo podobno misleče vrstnike. Poda razmišljanje o opredelitvi animeja in razlogih za njegovo priljubljenost, ponuja vpogled v možne načine uporabe animeja v splošnih knjižnicah in predstavlja študijo primera uspešnega anime kluba.

Metodologija: Ta študija primera raziskuje vlogo kluba anime za srednješolce pri privabljanju pogosto težko dosegljive skupine uporabnikov mladostnikov nazaj v splošne knjižnice. Obravnavani anime klub je specifičen po tem, da je uporabil strukturo knjižnega kluba. Da bi odgovorili na vprašanji, kako in zakaj je to delovalo, so bili podatki zbrani z raziskovanjem arhivskih zapisov in opazovanjem z udeležbo v dveh programskih letih (od oktobra 2021 do julija 2023).

Ugotovitve: Kljub težavam zaradi epidemioloških ukrepov v času pandemije COVID-19 se je klubu pridružilo 20 mladostnikov: v povprečju 7 posameznikov na sejo in 8 mladostnikov, ki so redno obiskovali srečanja, ki so potekala dvakrat mesečno. V drugem letu se je posameznih srečanj redno udeleževalo še več udeležencev. Klubu je uspelo zbrati zainteresirano, angažirano in pozitivno naravnano skupnost, katere člani so se nato začeli udeleževati tudi drugih programov knjižnice.

Uporabnost: Delo prikazuje anime klube kot učinkovito in dragoceno sredstvo, s katerim lahko splošne knjižnice po vsem svetu pritegnejo mlade oboževalce in jim ponudijo prostor, kjer lahko gojijo svoje interese. Knjižničarjem lahko služi kot spodbuda za razvoj podobne dejavnosti.

Ključne besede: mladostniki, mladi odrasli, anime, anime klub, študija primera, splošna knjižnica

1 Introduction

Professional guidelines instruct young adult librarians to constantly follow the interests of their user group so that they can, together with young patrons, create programs that will meet current needs and reflect various interests of young people in order to maintain their connection with the library. This is at the same time both very important and challenging. Important because it has been noticed that teens often lose interest in the library and use it primarily as a source of obligatory reading material. Challenging because the young are a heterogeneous group with diverse and numerous interests. This diversity is reflected in the number of their subcultures.

Among the various youth subcultures in Croatia, the community of manga and anime fans has found its place and has noticeably grown in number in recent years. This is a global phenomenon and the same thing is happening in

countries across the world (Guo and Zeng, 2020). Therefore, it presents an op-portunity for public libraries worldwide to draw in young fans by offering them a place for their community, a place where they can exchange experiences and find like-minded peers – a place like an anime club. With this purpose in mind, the intention of this paper is to familiarize the reader with anime, anime fans, and anime clubs and to offer a few possible reasons for the appeal of anime to young people.

2 What is anime and why is it so popular

Anime is an umbrella term for the Japanese school of animation within which there is a vast diversity of animation styles, themes and genres with some common stylistic features. Some authors note that in Japan the word anime refers to animation in general (as it is an abbreviation of the term animation), while in the rest of the world it is used to identify Japanese animation specifically (Price cited in Meo, 2016, p. 253). Denison (2015) views anime in a much broader sense as a cultural phenomenon that defies easy definition and is more than a single mode of media production as its styles and content can be found in a variety of products from advertisements and video games to theater productions.

After decades, in which American popular culture dominated global media and markets, Japanese popular culture, primarily manga and anime, as well as toys, cards, and video games, has grown into a worldwide phenomenon consumed by the rapidly increasing audience of youths, including both teenagers and new adults (Mechademia, 2006). Researchers found that the expansion of anime around the globe began in the 60ies of the 20th century with *Astro Boy* series by Tezuka, that it gained numerous fans in Europe and throughout North and South America in the 80ies and then became even more popular in the 90ies after the release of the feature-length film *Akira*[1] (December 1989 in the U.S.A.) and the contribution of Studio Ghibli's feature-length films, for its popularity to explode in the 21st century when it even made its way through to mainstream audiences, starting with the worldwide success of the children's anime series *Pokémon* (Meo, 2016; McKevitt, 2010).

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[1] "The film only played to small audiences on college campuses and in independent theaters, yet it gained a cult following in the early nineties thanks to a commercial release on vidéocassette." (McKevitt, 2010, p. 904)

Some authors (Levi, 2001; Meo, 2016) assert that this spread and popularity of anime has been motivated by the demand of the worldwide audience and not by major export efforts on the part of Japan. This fact raises the question, what is it that these Japanese cultural works bring to young audiences, which of their interests and needs do they fulfill that Western culture does not. On the other hand, Lu (2008) claims to have detected three cultural politics at work behind anime's internationalization, which, according to her, contribute to anime's global popularity: "de-politicized internationalization, which acts as a commercial tactic; occidentalized internationalization, which suggests a nationalistic practice; and selforientalized internationalization, which reveals a cultural desire." This would mean that Japanese studios and artists are deliberately creating works to appeal to a global audience.

It is not easy to determine why anime is such a popular medium. Authors who have been studying this field for years have considered a number of characteristics that attract people to anime; however, there are no simple universal answers. Therefore, in this article, we can only attempt to pinpoint and briefly introduce some of the most common arguments.

Scholars have two major competing theories and schools of thought (Guo and Zeng, 2020). One supports the position that anime is not strictly Japanese, but rather culturally neutral, universal, and cosmopolitan. Another theory states that anime contains elements of Japanese culture and fans around the world enjoy anime because of their love for this, to them, different and exotic culture.

2.1 Japanese cultural elements in anime

The origin of these animated series and films did not at first matter to the viewers and many of them were not aware that these works came from Japan (Vukadinović, 2013), especially in the U.S.A. where editors had stripped the animation of all visual and plot references of Japan (McKevitt, 2010). American producers in the 60ies assumed that the original animation's "Japaneseness" would not appeal to U.S. audiences so they continued to neutralise commercial anime imports until the late eighties (McKevitt, 2010). The grassroot fans on the other hand were attracted to anime precisely because it was exotic and different from the western mainstream culture. "Growing fan demands for cultural authenticity defined its underground existence. The commercial boom of the 1990s was the result of several U.S. companies rectifying this tension by giving the die-hard fan community what it wanted" (McKevitt, 2010, p. 898) – an authentic Japanese cultural product. Ogihara-Schuck (cited in Meo, 2016, p. 253–254) reflects that the origins of Japanese animation began to be recognized with the *Japanimation*

coinage[2] after the worldwide release in the 90s of Akira (1988), a feature film by Ōtomo Katsuhiro.

Levi (2001) claims that anime's international success is partly attributable to the fact that it is easily adaptable through dubbing, cutting and editing. Susan J. Napier (2004) noticed as the most fundamental attraction the notion that anime was *different* from Western creations. She reports that people often compared anime to Disney and Hollywood works and considered Western cartoons too simplistic and child-oriented and films unrealistic and tiringly optimistic and upbeat, whereas anime were seen as realistic depictions of everyday events and interactions with often downbeat endings or plots where the main character dies.

The attractive exoticism is manifested through the elements of Japanese everyday life that permeate anime and draw some fans to find out more about the references they encounter. The Internet made it possible for fans to immerse themselves deeper in this type of entertainment and learn more about anime and its connection with the Japanese culture, contemporary society or language and all that became very important for some of them. These efforts deepen fan's understanding of media texts while encouraging the exploration of the culture and country of their origin (Rončević, 2021).

For contemporary fans the country of origin can be very important. So much so that there is a debate among them whether one can even consider something that is not made in Japan by a Japanese studio to be anime. They ask themselves is anime a matter of style or origin (Álvarez and Melguizo, 2020)? Álvarez and Melguizo (2020) propose a more open stance on how to define anime, one that allows other industries outside of Japan to produce quality content and freely characterize it as anime if it meets its stylistic parameters. At the same time, they emphasize that attention must be paid to the fact that anime is an icon of the country from which it originates and that it represents the culture and behaviors typical of it. They therefore suggest that anime can be made anywhere in the world, as long as it includes its essential cultural and visual characteristics.

2.2 The creation of new myths

According to a Film Lexicon (2003), the predominant stylistic features of anime are characters with big eyes, quirky hairstyles and overemphasized expression

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[2] As a North American amalgamation of the words "Japan" and "animation", the term "Japanimation" was a popular term to refer to anime in the late 1980s.

of feelings; computer-controlled artistically striking elaboration of environments, reduced movements, and visual effects; while thematically anime connects mythological tradition and futuristic projection. Such narrow thematic framework does not correspond to the diversity of modern anime[3]. It does, however, point to an important element that, according to some authors, significantly contributes to the popularity of anime: the creation of new myths often based on old ones.

Antonia Levi (2001, p.33) asserts that in the postmodern global world of the late twentieth century ancient mythologies have been revived as "guides to aid contemporary myth-makers as they struggle to create new myths, new truths for the twenty-first century". Moreover, she believes that this is especially true for manga and anime. Levi (2001) further explains how well equipped Japan is to lead the way to a new age of mythology because in their culture their myths have been kept alive and taught in schools alongside with scientific discoveries. Therefore, the Japanese never lost the understanding of what myths are, they never confused mythological truth with rational truth. Levi (2001) substantiates these claims with the example of the works of Tezuka Osamu, the founder of Japan's postwar manga tradition. In the first volume of *Hi no tori* (The Phoenix, 1955) he demystified one of the Shinto creation myths by presenting the Gods as humans. This did not strip the myth of its power: "*Hi no tori* retained all the moral ambiguity and fearful reverence for nature that was evident in the original" (Levi, 2001). Tezuka's artistic heirs in manga and anime industry have followed his lead in creating new myths better suited to the needs and realities of the postmodern world.

Among anime the most vivid example of this are perhaps the works of the globally renowned animator Hayao Miyazaki. Levi (2001) corroborates this through the depictions of his feature-length films *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaa* (Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds, 1984) where, dealing with contemporary environmental issues, he created a new myth of a heroic savior; *Tonari no Totoro* (My Neighbour Totoro, 1988) where, on the basis of the Shinto tradition, he introduced new deities who take the viewer back to the world of nature, magic and hope; and *Mononoke Hime* (The Phantom Princess, 1997) in which his efforts to integrate Shinto animism with contemporary environmentalism culminated in a modern story where deities and nature fear humans and must fight against them for the salvation of the planet.

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[3] There are over 50 anime themes, and some of the most notable are mecha (involves mechs, which are massive robots or human-controlled robotic machines), isekai (protagonist dies in the real world and gets reincarnated into a magical world/fantasy land), superpowers, school, team and combat sports, idols, detective, love polygon, coming-of-age, etc.

Myths are created to model bravery – to guide ordinary, fearful people and inspire them. They help us embrace adventures and ordeals despite our fears and gain wisdom that enables us to contribute to society. Deities and heroes form the basis of every mythology, but modern anime mythology brings forth another character: an everyday hero. When we deliberate over heroes we might think of "mythological or legendary figures often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability" (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary) or some ordinary person who went beyond himself to do something great, "who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good" (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary). Anime successfully combines all these features into one person and presents ordinary people as everyday heroes in mundane settings such as high schools. Levi (2001) points out that heroes seem to be in short supply in the contemporary West due to its global economics, multinational corporations, and shifting moral and social climates. As she put it, there seems to be little opportunity for any individual to achieve heroic stature. Certainly the mainstream media in the West find it difficult to imagine anyone living out a heroic quest in a contemporary framework. Although they are a part of this cultural circle too, the Japanese have been able to continually come up with all kinds of heroes.

2.3 Examples of everyday heroes

Classic example of an everyday hero endowed with special powers is Tsukino Usagi, an ordinary schoolgirl living in an ordinary middle-class home who transforms into *Sailor Moon* and saves the earth with her demon-slaying skills. She is actually:

> "less than ordinary, a greedy, lazy, whining adolescent who gets poor grades largely as a result of her failure to study. The fact that even Usagi can be heroic given the right circumstances offers reassurance to adolescents who wonder if they will ever achieve even basic maturity, and Usagi does improve a bit as the series progresses." (Levi, 2001, p. 37)

Among the more recent examples, there is the eighth-grader Shigeo "Mob" Kageyama from Mob Psycho 100 (2016), who saves people by exorcizing evil spirits after school. Shigeo tapped into his inner wellspring of psychic prowess at a young age, but the power quickly proves to be a liability when he realizes the potential danger in his skills. To effectively control his skills, Mob enlists himself under the wing of Arataka Reigen, who, despite being a con artist claiming to be a psychic, looks out for the boy and provides our hero with sound advice, high standards, and noble attitudes. A heroes' journey begins with a call to adventure, a challenge, or quest that presents itself to an ordinary person in

the ordinary world. When a person is afraid, they need guidance from a mentor or a text to overcome their fears, cross the threshold, and commit to the journey (Campbell, 2008). In anime, this is often represented as a path of maturation, of striving to become the best version of oneself. In this way, anyone can become a hero – on purpose, or even accidentally.

Such scenario is typical of shounen[4] anime. Edward and Alphonse Elric from Hagane no Renkinjutsushi (Fullmetal Alchemist, 2003) are a classical example of boys on a quest. These brothers are ordinary boys who go through a terrible ordeal; they try to do something about it but are too inexperienced, so they have to suffer the consequences of their foolishness: Edward loses two of his limbs, but his younger brother loses his entire body, and his soul is transferred into a knightly armor. Edward is haunted by what he had caused and goes on a quest to find the solution, a way to bring his brother's body back. Along the way, brothers are tested – they succeed and fail, meet allies and enemies, learn, change, and mature. Viewers follow them on their moving adventure, empathize with them, learn with them, and experience catharsis together with them.

The best sub-genre for light, relaxing anime fun is *slice of life (SOL)* anime. It is a subgenre built on the broad concept of following ordinary people as they live their ordinary, relatable lives. One of the best examples of the everyday hero in this genre is Tomoya Okazaki from Clannad (2007) and Clannad: After Story (2008). Clannad follows the standard *slice of life* scenario where a dispirited high schooler meets a girl who wants to resurrect some forgotten school's club. Claiming he has nothing better to do, Tomoya decides to help the girl Nagisa achieve this goal along with the help of four other girls and his friend Sunohara. By investing his time to get to know and help Nagisa, Tomoya slowly transforms from a delinquent into an everyday hero who then attempts to help those other four girls to overcome their problems.

The real strength of this anime comes forth in the After Story where episode nine represents an emotional, but also structural turning point. That typical SOL scenario in which the show ends once the goal is reached, all the issues are resolved and everyone is happy, gets abandoned and the viewer finds out what happens after high school and *after the story* is over. Tomoya is now faced with being an

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[4] Following the categorization of manga, in anime there are also different demographic categories intended or expected to be watched by a specific audience. The five major anime demographic categories (editorial categories) are kodomo-muke (for children), shōnen (for young teenage boys, roughly between 12–18), shōjo (for young teenage girls, roughly between 8–18), seinen (for young adult males or younger men, roughly between 18–40), and josei (for adult females or younger women, roughly between 18–40).

adult, finding a job, a place to live and a peaceful life to lead. He wants to get married, and Nagisa wants to have kids. They end up doing both, but tragedy strikes the young family.

Clannad is a story filled with harsh truths about life forcing the viewer to think about their personal "what if's?". It is the conveying of tragedy and sorrow happening to ordinary people that makes Clannad into something special. Tomoya depicts an everyday hero who faced with personal tragedy and emotional turmoil does not cope well, but overcomes them eventually and finds happiness again. *Slice of life* anime series captivate their audience with the ability to capture real life emotions and portray them in animation.

At the same time, anime "does not attempt to emulate reality – it knows its own limits – instead it offers an alternative [...], the surreal framework of anime's style that allows [...] viewers to so easily project their own cultural and experiential likenesses onto anime." (Kasa cited in Bennett, p. 3). Portraying reality realistically without actually trying to emulate it – this sort of ambivalence is typical in anime. It is perhaps the most obvious and predominant in the morally ambiguous depiction of the main protagonists, who often display a dark side that ranges from mildly regrettable to truly appalling. (Levi, 2001). This is also one of the features that distinguish anime from American/Western animation. There are rarely true villains – "all heroes have flaws, and all villains have some redeeming trait of humanity" (Bennett, 2010, p. 7). Characters cannot usually be seen as simply good or bad, they are deep and complex with thoughtfully developed backstories that enable better understanding of their motifs. Similarly, their causes may not always be good or righteous but that does not diminish their heroism:

> "Anime exposes the audience to the idea that one can be loyal, even to the death, to a leader who is unworthy or to a cause that is questionable, but that such loyalty is still noble in its own way because "fighting for the wrong cause does not affect the heroism of those doing the fighting provided that their dedication is sincere." Yes, sometimes evil wins in anime, but that only happens when a good person does what he does for all the wrong reasons." (Bennett, 2010, p. 7)

Levi (2001) argues that it is exactly this internal definition of the heroic that enables anime to create everyday heroes in ordinary settings "since the setting is relatively irrelevant to the heroism".

Such thought-provoking use of mythology and everyday heroes enables anime to serve young people as a guiding thread on the path of maturation and help

them fulfill one of their basic needs, the need for wisdom concerning how to be fully human (Roeser and Pinela, 2014). Psychological needs such as the need to feel competent in managing external and internal environments; the need to feel connected to other people and groups; and the need to feel autonomy or self-determination are a subset of basic human necessities for (mental) health (Deci and Ryan, 2012). Adolescence is the time of self-searching and self-defining, differentiating from childhood and positioning oneself in regard to one's surroundings, family and mainstream culture. Therefore, some of those who were watching anime as children turn their attention elsewhere while those who start watching as teens take it as their identity marker. They become fans and fandom[5] comes into play to fulfill their need for belonging.

2.4 Anime fandom

According to Bennett, anime fandom is closely connected with the idea of family and "what it means to belong to a group when you have always been an outsider" (Bennett, 2010, p. 32). This is a *family of choice*, a modern concept prominent in the postmodern world where people want to be more individualistic and to choose their family out of people with whom they can identify rather than the biological grouping into which they were born (Bennett, 2010). Anime fandom is a matter of choice, and its most noticeable characteristic since the beginning in the late 70ies has been activism within community (McKevitt, 2010). Activism manifests through creation of various fan art, translation of works (e.g. subtitles), starting fan clubs or holding conventions (or "cons").

> "The demand for activism contributed to a unifying sense of community and permitted participants to experiment with new cultural identities [...] illustrated fans' conscious efforts to define anime as a distinct cultural category, to develop knowledge about the medium and its relationship to Japanese culture, and to construct boundaries to mark the territory in which legitimate fan behavior could take place." (McKevitt, 2010, p. 905–906)

The above quotation confirms that active participation within fandom enables young people to experiment with their identity within well founded cultural boundaries that differ from rules of their birth family and mainstream surroundings. Local anime club with its communal activities of watching, interpreting,

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[5] Oxford Learner's Dictionaries *online* define a fan as "a person who admires somebody/something or enjoys watching or listening to somebody/something very much". Definition of fandom is "the fans of a particular person, team, TV show, etc. considered together as a community."

and participating provides public space where like-minded individuals construct their distinct community where members accept each other without too much judgment for they are all being *weird* together (McKevitt, 2010). By 2004, anime clubs existed on nearly every continent (Patten cited in Lu, 2008).

There are many other ways fans can get together to share interests, such as writing fan fiction, cosplaying in an event, publishing magazines and interacting on the internet. Bennett claims that fears of the internet causing depersonalization are unfounded, as internet access is in fact allowing whole new communities to grow which would previously have been impossible to actualize (Bennett, 2010). One example of this is *MyAnimeList* or *MAL*: an anime and manga social networking and social cataloging application website run by volunteers, which has been active since 2004 and is free of charge (MyAnimeList, 2023). The site provides its users with a list-like system for organizing and scoring anime and manga, and facilitates fan connection through forums, clubs, and blogs where users write their reviews, ask questions and discuss content. In 2022 there were more than 18 million active users from 200 countries around the world (DNP Group, 2022).

Today Japanese popular culture is considered a global and transnational phenomenon resulting in multiple local fandoms with distinct manifestations that are simultaneously part of a worldwide community which communicates in a specific jargon. This jargon specific to anime fandom includes numerous Japanese words such as *otaku*, *kawaii*, *doki doki*, *tsundere*, which are used to denote situations, phenomena, character types, etc.[6] Most people have probably heard of *Pokémon* but anime fans are not just familiar with the stories, they use inside terms to communicate with each other and can sound to the uninformed as if they are talking in another language (Guo and Zeng, 2020). Some fans that enjoy anime with original voice acting and subtitles in another language, build up the interest in the Japanese language over time and want to learn more.

2.5 From cultural elements mixing to anime culture

The Japanese origin of anime is not very important to all fans. For some, as it has been suggested above, anime serves as a vehicle to explore their own issues, not because it is "exotic" but because it is universal. This takes us back to the aforementioned theory that anime is not strictly Japanese but rather culturally neutral, universal and cosmopolitan. Kasa contributes to this view by pointing out that "[a]nime has its own unique culture, offering universal treatments that

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[6] https://www.urbandictionary.com/

can be read identically by each viewer regardless of their own cultural background." (Kasa cited in Bennett, 2010, p. 20)

According to Lu (2008) internationalization, meaning incorporation of non-Japanese or 'universal' elements, is one of anime's most distinctive features. Various authors (see Rončević 2021a) state that the principle of *mukokuseki* is one of the key concepts of anime that facilitates this medium's penetration into foreign markets. The *mukokuseki* principle marks the aesthetics of a denationalized space in which Japanese elements and characteristics are erased. In Japan, the term is used dually, but not mutually exclusive, denoting the mixing of cultural elements of multiple origins and erasing obvious ethnic and cultural characteristics (Iwabuchi cited in Rončević, 2021a: p. 77).

There are many examples of incorporating non-Japanese elements into anime from the classic *The Alchemist Brothers* where the protagonists have western names, Edward and Alphonse; through the characters' love of classical music, for example Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* in *Kage no Jitsuryokusha ni Naritakute!* (*The Eminence of Shadow*, 2022); to the well-known *Shingeki no Kyojin* (*Attack on Titan* – AOT, 2013) which is imbued with German language and its architecture resembles European pre-industrial townships.

The *mukokuseki* principle continues in character design. Due to their lack of explicit "Japaneseness", character appearance is often interpreted as "Western". For Ruh (cited in Rončević, 2021a, p. 78), these are actually abstract representations of the human body dependent on the author, the narrative and the tropes of the genre, which is why he prefers to consider their appearance as "nationless". Western animation had a strong influence on the early development of anime and its characters. In this regard, the creativity of Tezuka Osamu, who was strongly influenced by the Disney animation, stands out. Thanks to his inventions a specific anime style had been gradually developing – the style of "big eyes" and light complexion, moving only the mouth, dark lines of the characters, the death of the main character and serious themes (Lu cited in Rončević, 2021a, p. 98).

Amy Shirong Lu (cited in Rončević, 2021a, p. 99) believes that because the themes and actions of many anime touch on universal narratives, they actually lack the qualities associated with the Orient, which is why she considers it more of an international medium. Therefore, as Napier (cited in Guo and Zeng, 2020, p. 488) points out, many fans enjoy anime not because they are attracted to Japanese culture per se, but perhaps to anime culture.

When one connects the inevitable elements of Japanese culture with elements of mythology and heroism, with elements of universality and cosmopolitanism,

and adds to that the characteristic anime style that is imitated by numerous fans who are also interested in content creators (screenwriters, producers, voice actors, composers), one is actually talking about anime culture. Thus, young people who watch anime are not only watching Japanese cartoons but also immersing themselves in a rich and wide-ranging culture that gathers, connects, and unites young people of different nations with different needs and interests.

The final point is that anime culture is such a prolific provider of content that anyone can find anime to their liking, whether they choose by theme or genre, setting, and atmosphere or search for inter-character relationship-driven stories.

3 Anime in the library

Anime can be interesting for libraries both in the context of reading promotion and of creating programs for quality leisure time. Nina Exner (2012) states that in regard to manga, anime and reading promotion librarians go back to the old debate about whether comics should be part of the library collection and whether they can serve as stimulating reading material for beginners. It became clear over time that the side winning the debate is the side that advocates comic books as an excellent incentive for reluctant readers to fall in love with reading and then move on to reading short stories and novels, and as such are mandatory material in libraries. Concerning manga and anime, this is especially true for English speaking countries. However, considering that only a small number of manga get translated into Croatian language and even fewer anime have subtitles in Croatian, the possibility of directly using manga and anime as means to encourage reading in Croatian public libraries is quite limited. The possibilities increase if manga and anime are viewed as media platforms that indicate the interests of their consumers.

Researchers have found that tying fan activities such as gaming, movies, and manga together with books can increase cross-platform interest (Welch, 2008). Velna Rončević (2021a) also pointed out to this while writing about a marketing model called *anime media mix*. According to this model, fans are first introduced to the story and characters through manga, after which they continue their interest through anime and other creations such as games, visual novels, fan prose (*fanfiction*); or first contact with the content is established through anime, and then they explore other creations, although in the 21st century it is increasingly happening that video games pave the way for anime and manga (Rončević, 2021a).

Librarians can take advantage of this tendency of fans to use different media platforms based on their awakened interest in certain content and encourage them to read books by carefully selecting literature. After all, some highly regarded anime works are based on books, such as Hayao Miyazaki's film *Howl no Ugoku Shiro* (Howl's Moving Castle, 2004), which is based on the fantasy novel of the same name by the British writer Diane Wynne Jones or the successful series Gankutsuou (Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo, 2004) by Studio Gonzo, which set the action of the French novel of the same name by Alexandre Dumas in the future. Many anime reference fiction and/or historical figures in all sorts of ways, for example in a popular *mecha*[7] anime *Eighty Six* (*86*, 2021) the main hero reads *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel by the German writer Erich Maria Remarque, while the *Fate series* presents eminent historical figures from different time periods from Alexander The Great and Ceasar all the way to Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison. This opens a broad set of possibilities for librarians to use in anime clubs for reading promotion and knowledge expansion through fiction, history books, biographies, documentaries etc.

In countries where Japanese and English are not native languages, reading promotion can be substituted with foreign language learning. There is a well-known debate in the anime fan community whether it is better to watch subtitled or dubbed movies/series (sub vs. dub). Free online streaming services usually enable watching anime in two ways: with original Japanese voice acting and subtitles in English/another language or dubbed into English/another language.[8] Reading subtitles can be frustrating at first because the words disappear from the screen too quickly or a slow reader can not enjoy the animation while focusing on reading, but it all gets better with practice. Regularly watching content with subtitles will make fans quicker readers (Pard, 2020).

In Croatia, fans prefer listening to Japanese voices and reading English subtitles (Tandarić, 2016), which is quite useful for learning English, but also an incentive for learning Japanese. While researching this field, Velna Rončević (2021) discovered that numerous studies have established a link between the growing interest in Japanese popular culture and the motivation to learn the Japanese language. McKevitt (2010) noticed the same thing happening in the USA with some of the early fans as well as with many college students in Japanese language courses today who state that anime and manga inspired them to register. The library can serve as a bridge between interest in anime and learning foreign languages

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[7] A genre of Japanese animation that showcases the use of giant, humanoid robots known as *mechs*.

[8] For example, *Zorox.to, 9anime* or *Crunchyroll*.

by acquiring and offering materials for learning English or Japanese and/or by organizing an activity such as *Language Cafe*[9] among other anime club activities.

The interests of individuals within anime community often extend to the Japanese language, traditional and modern Japanese culture, as well as all other related phenomena such as visual novels, light novels, Chinese and Korean versions of manga, Japanese video games, etc. (Rončević, 2021). Beyond the content of the anime itself, fans are interested in the creators of anime and the voice actors. Fans also like to express themselves through creation so they write fanfiction, draw comics, make mashup videos etc. (Reysen et al., 2020). Although this work focuses on anime, it is important to note that all the above areas of interest can be incorporated into an anime club thereby enriching it and increasing the quality of the program.

Anime club has been present in libraries for decades. According to Pard they started out across the USA as

> "gatherings of college students who were passionate about getting to see any sort of English translated version of Japanese animation (something that was rare in the early 1990s). They gathered to watch fan subbed versions on imported anime which were subtitled by groups of fans like themselves. The rise of internet access gave way to more accessible anime viewing, including subscription streaming sites, wider sales of translated content, and even public and school library anime clubs." (Pard, 2020: p. 7)

Ever since those first gatherings, screenings of episodes and films seem to be a large and expected part of anime club programs. Although each local community adapts the activities of the club to its own interests and needs, a similar structure can be found in most American anime clubs. It usually starts with ten minutes of mingling, followed by either some short craft, game, activity or an hour of conversation on topics related to anime, Japanese culture or pop culture in general, and ends with communal watching of anime (Pard, 2020). Providing a craft or activity in addition to the screening can encourage attendees to bring friends along who are not so much into anime yet, as these extra activities will make them feel more comfortable.

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[9] The idea is to practice your language skills and cultural awareness by talking to native speakers and other learners, informally, over coffee or tea. *Language Cafe* is usually led by a native speaker or a teacher of a particular language, but it can also function well as a place where those interested in learning and practicing will encourage, guide and help each other in mastering a new language.

Anime clubs are not just about watching cartoons and that is why screenings are not really necessary, although they are a common and important part of the club meeting. According to Pard (2020), it is even welcome to sometimes change the routine of the club and devote the entire meeting to a longer activity themed from the favorite show of the members. Some libraries choose to purposely create Screen-Free Anime Clubs to encourage adolescents to spend their time more creatively away from smartphones and computers (Pard, 2020). Games, crafts and activities enable participants to develop a variety of skills and experiences of which meeting people with common interests is a large part. In addition, social engagement can be a strong selling point to those who do not see why the library would want to host such program (Pard, 2020).

Teen services librarians throughout the USA responded early to teens' love for manga and anime which resulted in anime clubs becoming a staple at many libraries by 2007 (Brehm-Heeger et al., 2007). Besides realizing that hosting regular anime nights is a great way to serve an often hard-to-reach user group, they have noticed that anime is getting ever more popular (Brehm-Heeger et al., 2007). A decade later, Pard (Pard, 2020) noted that there are few professional texts available for librarians who want to start their own anime club, despite the high interest. That is why she wrote the manual *Anime Clubs for Public Libraries: A Practical Guide for Librarians* which was published in 2020. Broken into fourteen chapters, Pard's guide allows the reader to dip in at will, with the first half of the book dedicated to the logistics of running a club and the latter half focused on the specific kinds of themed events a club might host.

Programing enables libraries to fulfill one of their most important roles and that is to meet the individual's needs for personal development and purposeful spending of leisure time. By organizing a program like an anime club libraries can provide a safe space for anime fan community and show these young people that libraries understand their subculture and how it extends far beyond watching animated series (Roeser and Pinela, 2014). In the USA, where anime subculture has a long tradition, even more ambitious programing projects are set up in libraries, for instance anime festivals that combine fan gatherings with anime screenings, gaming, reading and discussion, panels, costuming, and more (Czarnecki cited in Exner, 2012, p. 28).

In addition to fulfilling the aforementioned need for autonomy concerning who one chooses to be as a person and choosing one's family, such events provide adolescents with opportunities to immerse themselves into something greater that far outreaches them as individuals. This need for self-transcendence during adolescence, for losing oneself in something beyond self is endangered by the lack of attention from adults and institutions and may lead to substance abuse

and all kinds of risky behavior (Roeser and Pinela, 2014). As cultural institutions libraries have vast opportunities to cultivate healthy forms of self-transcendence in young people through programs based on art, that is music, stories, games, films, manga and anime etc.

4 Anime Club for High Schoolers case study

What makes this *Anime Club for High Schoolers* an interesting subject of a case study is the fact that its structure was inspired by and based on the way a book club functions. The case study focuses on answering basic research questions about how and why the program worked, and what can be learned from that. The data collection techniques used were archival record research and observation with participation, given that the researcher was also a club facilitator and library employee. The archival records included membership and attendance statistics, a facilitator's work diary, WhatsApp group communication, and an evaluation questionnaire at the end of the program year. The Anime Club was observed during the two program years.

In autumn 2021 *The Anime Club for High Schoolers* was launched as a pilot program of a public library. The realization of the pilot started with the assumption that among young library users, both those who read manga and those who do not, many like to watch anime and would gladly participate in an anime club. Why anime? The goal was to search for this hidden group of users, as well as to attract potential young users to the library, and find out more about their needs. Unlike manga, which was well represented in this library's collection, anime was poorly represented due to various problems in film distribution, which made it an even more special and interesting material for working with young people.

The target user group of this program was the adolescents. It is a group of individuals who share the common need to define their own identities. In many cases, this search for their own identity leads them away from previous interests, and this often includes moving away from books and libraries. To counter this trend, librarians launch programs to attract young people back to the library. To achieve this, they need something that is not offered by local associations and is at the same time very interesting to a larger number of young people. As shown in the previous paragraphs, the growing popularity and expansion of manga and anime fan communities is a global phenomenon mainly among tweens, teenagers, young adults, and new adults. The fact that there were no contents in the area specifically intended for manga and anime fans gave the library a great opportunity to offer young people something completely new and in line with their interests.

The theme of the program was narrowed down to anime, the user group was specified as adolescents, but then the scheduling presented a bit of an issue. A large number of secondary schools in the area work in two shifts, which means that one week children are at school from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., and the following week from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. At the same time, many schools have classes exclusively in the morning from 8 a.m. to 1 or 2 p.m. In addition, teens engage in various extracurricular activities such as sports training, music school, acting lessons and so on, even on Saturday. The library usually organizes programs for teenagers on Saturday mornings, as the library is open only until 1 p.m. Therefore, scheduling any time meant that a large section of young users was going to be missed. It was finally decided to schedule the anime club pilot from 11 a.m. to 13 p.m. once a month on Saturday. Already at the first meeting, the participants stated that once a month was too rare for them and that they would like to continue meeting on Saturdays at the same time, but every two weeks. The librarians were pleased that these young people were so interested in the club and were happy to fulfill their wish.

Another issue arose with the event venue. The multimedia hall, which was normally used for holding programs with teenagers, was booked months in advance by another organizer. As all this took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the room designated for reading newspapers was unavailable to users at the time, so the anime club found its temporary home there. Although the library users peeked inside through the glass doors, the club members still had enough privacy to freely express their impressions and thoughts. From November 2021 to March 2022, users over the age of 16 were allowed to enter the library only upon presentation of a valid EU Covid certificate or other appropriate proof of vaccination. Most high school students did not have such certificates, so they could not enter the library. Fortunately, there was a cafe in another part of the library with a separate entrance that did not require a vaccination certificate, so the club moved there. The working conditions in the cafe were far from ideal for an anime club. In order not to disturb the normal business of the cafe, the group had to sit near the bar during a very busy period. The noise made it difficult to communicate, and curious guests of the cafe often interrupted the conversation by asking what was going on or commenting on the content that the club members were displaying on a large portable screen. When this epidemiological measure was finally lifted in March, the anime club returned to the newspaper reading room where it remained until the end of the program year in July. Such detailed descriptions of the time and place of the meetings are intended to serve as evidence showing just how much young people wanted this anime club and how many obstacles they were ready to overcome in order to realize it.

Due to problems with the venue and constant changes in epidemiological measures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided that the club would

start without posters and media announcements/invitations in order to avoid possible high turnout. Librarians whose children were attending high school at the time asked them to spread the word about starting an anime club among their peers. A professor at the local art school, a close associate of the library, also encouraged some of her students to join the club. With this word-of-mouth approach, 10 high school students gathered at the first meeting, some of whom did not show up again, and some brought a friend the next time.

The work method chosen for the *Anime club for high schoolers* was inspired by and based upon the way the library's *Book club for high schoolers* had been functioning for years. The pilot was therefore outlined with a clear club structure in mind: the meetings are to be managed by a librarian, last for two hours and to be divided into three segments. The first segment is intended for discussion about the watched anime, the second for socializing with activities prepared by the participants, and the third segment is designed for proposing, presenting and selecting anime to watch for the next meeting. The goal was for the participants of the anime club to feel that this group is theirs and for them. The freedom to choose what they wanted to watch and then discuss, as well as the opportunity to lead the conversations during the socializing segment based on activities they have chosen and created, were to give them the feeling of ownership.

Just like in the book club, all members watch the same anime at home and then discuss it during the next meeting. The purpose of this first segment is to create a safe environment where young people can exchange their impressions, thoughts and feelings based on the anime they have watched. It is the leader's task to recognize tangents and bring the discussion back to the anime, along with making sure that everyone has a chance to speak during the meeting. Facilitating discussion is a skill that includes asking prompting questions in a way that encourages and engages participants, but does not pressure them. In order to achieve all that, it was decided that the discussion leader should be a librarian with experience in facilitating the book club.

It was assumed that the conversation about the watched anime could last between half an hour and an hour, depending on the content of the anime, the number of participants who watched it and their willingness to express their impressions. Those who have not watched the anime would also be welcome to the club meetings, if they do not mind spoilers. Even if they would be a bit bored during this first segment, everyone should have fun during the rest of the club meeting.

The second meeting segment is intended as a time for socializing. The design and management of this part should be completely taken over by young people. To ensure this, some time should be left at the end of each meeting for participants

to agree on who will prepare some activity for the next time. The activities could be a quiz related to anime (trivia, music quiz) or a presentation about an element of Japanese culture, etc.

The book club experience has shown that adolescents very much enjoy that part of the meeting when they choose which book is to be read next. So much so, that this has become an unavoidable ending ritual. It was decided to test whether this activity would be just as fun at the anime club, but with the addition of a small twist. The election has been turned into an elimination one, so hand is raised for anime series which one does not want to watch. Participants are to suggest an anime by finding its description on the *My Anime List* (MAL) website. Anyone can suggest one or more anime, but on the condition that it is no more than 12 episodes long so that everyone can watch it until the next meeting, and it must have age appropriate content. Each proposer then presents the anime he suggests for viewing, stating the reasons for recommending it, what genre it is, what topics it deals with, etc. This way of choosing the adolescents found as unusual, instructive and fun. In addition to getting the chance to recommend to someone an anime they like or have on their *plan to watch* list, young people practice presentation skills and how to stand up for something they believe in and find important.

Goals for the pilot were set based on knowledge of previous adolescent event attendance and engagement in library book clubs. The realities of contemporary high school circumstances with limited time for students to pursue extracurricular activities were also taken in account. Based on the stated, and on the assumption that anime is a popular and interesting content for adolescents, the following goals were set to measure the success of the anime club pilot:
1) 5–10 adolescents enrolling;
2) 3–5 adolescents regularly attending meetings (at least 50 %) from the beginning to the end of the program year (October to June);
3) every regularly attending adolescent providing at least one activity for at least one meeting.

These goals were measured by taking attendance during each anime club meeting and by recording who prepared which activity. There were 20 anime club meetings held during the first program year from October 2021 to July 2022. The following results were recorded:
1) 20 adolescents enrolled: 7 individuals/session on average;
2) 8 adolescents regularly attended meetings (at least 50 %, that is 10 meetings) from the beginning to the end of the program year (October to July), 5 members skipped only one meeting each (three were members from the beginning, two from February);
3) every regularly attending adolescent provided one activity for a meeting.

Considering the stated goals and found results, the pilot program was deemed successful. Among the 20 registered participants, those who appeared only once were also recorded. Young people came and went: they came out of curiosity; they left because of changes in training dates or because of new family obligations, etc. It happened, for example, that one girl brought two of her friends and they then became the most frequent participants, but the girl stopped coming due to a change in her choir's rehearsal schedule. The most visited club was in November 2021 when 11 anime fans participated.

As expected, as the end of the school year and the beginning of summer approached, the number of participants in the meetings began to decrease. However, due to the great interest of the five most loyal members, the program year was ultimately extended to the month of July. Although some of them started working as soon as school ended, they still didn't want to give up the anime club.

From the beginning to the end of the program year, more adolescent boys than girls participated in the meetings, which is the complete opposite of the experience with the book club. In total, there were 12 registered girls and 8 boys, however, among the regular 8 attendees were 2 girls and 6 boys. Twenty anime series were watched and commented upon.

Participant feedback was gathered at the end of the program year via an anonymous paper survey. The evaluation questionnaire entitled "Review of the first year of Anime Club" contained 14 questions. Young people were asked how did they find out about the club and why they joined; what did they expect and to what extent were their expectations met; how satisfied were they with the general club organization (e.g. venue) and the way club functioned (frequency of meetings, quality of structured conversations about watched anime, how many opportunities they had to participate, etc.) as well as to review the leadership performance. After giving the club a final rating in *anime style* from 1 to 10, they were asked to write what anime club means to them. Participant feedback was limited to those who came to the last two meetings which included some of the regulars and some of the occasional partakers. These eight collected responses do not reflect the opinions of all participants, but nevertheless provide important insight.

Young people joined the club expecting to talk about anime and meet new people who love anime, so everyone felt that their expectations were fulfilled to a very large extent. Nobody offered an answer to the questions about what they didn't like and what was missing, except for one participant who apparently likes to sleep longer on Saturdays, so he didn't like the 11 a.m. meeting time. They liked discussing anime, the people who gathered in the club, the atmosphere that prevailed, and the fact that they have discovered and watched a lot of good anime.

Most of them felt that they had enough opportunities to participate in activities during meetings, only one participant thought that they had too many, while one had too few opportunities to participate. Everyone was very satisfied with the conversations about the assigned animes. Leader's work (communication with the participants, leading the discussion, support in the selection of activities, etc.) was rated 10 by 90% of the participants. The technical organization of the club was rated the worst due to the previously mentioned venue problems, but it was actually quite highly rated in the range of 7 to 9.

After reflecting on the individual elements, participants were asked to rate the club overall. The anime club pilot was completed with an average rating of 9.5, for which an explanation was offered by one participant: "The members still need to get to know each other better and relax, and it will be 10." At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they had any suggestions for the following year. There were no concrete suggestions offered; however, one participant thanked the library for organizing the anime club and expressed hope that it would continue.

Information about the intrinsic motivation/ interests and needs of the participants was intended to be obtained through answer analysis to the question "What does Anime Club mean to you?". The participants mostly expressed a strong feeling of satisfaction because they had fun and found a group of people they could easily talk to about their favorite subject. Therefore, the anime club was a place of entertainment in which these young people fulfilled their need to socialize and belong to a group. During the second program year one participant shared with the researcher that the anime club meeting is a highlight of her social life mostly because she was stressed out by the demanding school and had no time to meet with her friends due to different school shifts and the bus schedule issues that all travelling students have.

Considering the success of the pilot, it was understood that the anime club would continue its work, so the second program year lasted from October 2022 to July 2023. The same goals and evaluation criteria were set as in the previous year, 21 meeting was held and the following data collected:
1) 23 adolescents enrolled (8 from the pilot year): 11 individuals/session on average;
2) 10 adolescents regularly attended meetings (at least 50 %) from the beginning to the end of the program year (October to July), 6 members skipped only one meeting each (four members from the pilot, one from October, one from November);
3) every regularly attending adolescent provided at least one activity for a meeting.

At the beginning of the second programing year, a poster in the library next to the manga shelves was added to the word-of-mouth marketing strategy, which resulted in a slight increase in registered participants compared to the first year. The Music Department was chosen as a venue to hold the meetings in, because there, in a secluded corner, is enough privacy for a small group to talk freely and laugh loudly, and the atmosphere is cozy with music in the background. The interest and need for an anime club among new members had been underestimated, so the anime corner was often too cramped, and when 18 participants came to the meeting, they occupied the entire department. This happened, for example, when one member prepared a musical quiz for the central part of the club.

As can be seen from the above data, in the second year, there was an increase in interested young people (three more than during the pilot), and more participants regularly attended individual meetings (four more than during the pilot). By observing the group dynamics, it was noticed that during the second year, the members became more connected; they started playing online games together and going out for walks. They went to the theater together to support the acting ambitions of one member, brought cakes that they had baked themselves on the occasion of their birthday, and went to the cinema together to watch the first anime that came to the local cinema in years. They also started participating in other library programs such as literary meetings.

During the second program year, 22 anime series were watched and commented upon. The conversation about the watched anime included a review of the animation and soundtrack; personality, believability and motivation of the characters; the quality of individual story arcs; and the themes and ideas that the anime deals with. By discussing art and ideas, young people grow intellectually as well as spiritually because they are not taking what is presented to them at face value but digging deeper and understanding the root causes of events – why people do the things they do, what drives them, and how we can improve as people.

The most popular activity in the central socializing part of the meeting was the three by three (3x3) photo collage. This activity was suggested by one of the members who encountered such photo collages in online fan communities. A themed 3x3 collage is made from anime clips. The topic can be your favorite anime, the most annoying characters, your favorite love couples, etc. The collage is shown on a large screen, and its author stands next to the screen and talks about the selected anime. The audience often chimes in with their opinion about an anime or a character, and sometimes a heated discussion ensues because anime encourage fans to talk. On many occasions during the year, the assertion from

professional literature was confirmed that "even a quiet person will talk about his favorite characters with a passion that seems endless" (Reysen and Branscombe cited in Guo and Zeng, 2020: page 484). Young people thus practice public speaking and presentation skills in a friendly environment. This activity helps adolescents to form their own opinions and develop their own taste, as well as critical and creative abilities.

Considering anime as a media platform that indicates the interests of its consumers, as it was discussed in previous chapters, the librarian decided to recommend some books to the members. By observing what kind of anime particular members like and, in those anime, what are they specifically drawn to, the librarian can then select books tailored to their individual interests and thus encourage them to read. For example, to a girl who enjoyed *86*, and especially the story of the main male protagonist, the librarian offered a book in which that character became engrossed: *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque. The book *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugacky brothers was recommended for a boy who likes anime that deal with deeper topics and encourage reflection. This led to the establishment of a book club for high school students on their initiative. Six anime club members joined the book club (3 girls and 3 boys), and one girl took on the leadership role with the support of the librarian.

Two years of monitoring the anime club showed that many high school students in Croatia are eager for anime culture content and that they are ready to use the various services of the public library when librarians show that they understand the interests and needs of young people.

5 Conclusion

The popularity of anime is a global phenomenon that libraries worldwide can use to create programs that will attract adolescents and enable them to spend their leisure time creatively. The Anime Club for High Schoolers case study has shown that an anime club, when based on the way a book club functions, is a low-budget program applicable to public libraries. It provides a means of reasserting the library as a still-relevant space for young adults to enjoy their interests in a safe, welcoming, and nurturing physical space. By attracting young anime fans, the library has the opportunity to become a stimulating space for adolescents to explore and test out their identity within anime culture. In addition, by using anime as a media platform to discover the interests of young people, librarians can get the opportunity to put the book back into the hands of adolescents and, with thoughtfully selected books, encourage them to read.

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