

CHAPTER FOUR

CHOOSING THE TITLES

No Easy Task

Sometimes you may be able to hire a ready-made exhibition which is being sent from place to place to promote an interest in books. If so, the titles will have already been selected. More often, however, decisions on what to include will form an important part of the planning process. How should the decisions be made, and who are the best people to make them?

The first consideration is the target area: Who is to be moved or influenced by the show of books? Well, if it's a conference of chemists, then the answer is fairly easy. It may still need an expert to choose the exact books that are complementary to the themes being discussed at the conference. Perhaps you have just such a person on the exhibition's organising committee. If not, you are sure to find a librarian or a writer with the necessary expertise to produce a list of books that matches or enlarges what is going to be discussed or is of special interest to the delegates.

When we move to more general areas, it all becomes more difficult. An exhibition of children's books to try to stimulate a greater interest in reading or book possession immediately lays open the whole world of taste, opinion and prejudice. Some experts favour this group of reading schemes; some that; and each believes that those advocated by the others are bad if not perniciously dangerous! The National Book League in Britain, has an annual Children's Books of the Year Exhibition consisting of the 350 best books from the previous year chosen

by an internationally recognised expert. But still there are reviewers who fault the choice; and 350 is barely 10 per cent of one year's output of children's books in Britain, let alone all the many thousands appearing in other countries.

Usually, 350-500 titles form a good collection for a non-specialist book exhibition.

How to make the Selection

The best answer is to choose the most expert person available, be he teacher, librarian, children's book-seller or critic, and give him his head. True, the task can be done by committee if everyone on the committee is of expert status, but the choice is likely to lack bite. Committees are notorious for compromise, and compromise is rarely the characteristic needed if a display of books is to alert, startle or excite the visitor. The selector should be told as many details as possible about the target group: age, background, education, interests, reading ability (where known); and then should be left to get on with it. He should also be told how many books there is room for, making sure that the figure is calculated to allow generous space to each book. A crowded exhibition is almost always dispiriting, though on the other hand books swimming in space are not conducive to browsing either.

The selector should be among the first people to start work once the organising committee has decided to go ahead with the exhibition. Not only can the selection itself be a long process, the books themselves may take months to arrive. The list has to go to publishers or other suppliers, and the titles requested have to be looked out, packed and delivered. There is a school of thought that says that dynamic exhibitions are completed at the very last minute under conditions of great drama. It may sound romantic, but it is nonsense; and usually, a very great strain on all concerned.