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A partnership approach to children’s literature collections

Rachel Pattinson explores how the Vital North Partnership between Newcastle University and Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children’s Books is opening up new routes into the city’s children’s literature collections.

SEVEN Stories: The National Centre for Children’s Books and Newcastle University share a big ambition – that Newcastle becomes a centre for excellence in children’s literature. The two organisations have been working together towards that goal since before Seven Stories first opened its doors in 2005, and since then have collaborated on over 200 projects.

In 2015, we secured Arts Council England funding for the Vital North Partnership, a project to strengthen and scale up our collaboration. This is opening up new routes into Newcastle’s children’s literature collections; from new research, to exhibitions and from activities with schools and communities to digital projects.

Our children’s literature collections

Newcastle is home to some amazing children’s book collections, which are at the heart of our collaboration.

Newcastle University’s Special Collections holds historical children’s books. Of particular note are its collection of 18th and 19th century chapbooks and the Burnett, Butler and Chorley collections, which include rare children’s books from the 18th century to the early 20th century. The university library is also home to the Booktrust Collection, a collection of contemporary children’s books from the 1970s onwards.

Seven Stories is the national home of children’s books. It holds a unique archive of children’s literature ranging from 1930 to the present day, representing over 250 authors and illustrators. Seven Stories collects everything that goes into the making of a book – draft manuscripts, rough artwork, correspondence, editors notes, proofs – and it also has a library of over 35,000 children’s books.

Our collections teams work closely and we have developed complementary collection development policies, enabling us to collect a wide range of children’s literature material.

Collaborative collection acquisitions

Sometimes, however, a collection spans both of our collecting remits, and we’re beginning to explore joint and complementary acquisitions through our partnership.

Joint acquisitions

Earlier this year, we were delighted to announce our joint acquisition of Dr Brian Alderson’s personal children’s book collection. Brian is an expert on children’s books, one of the pioneers of children’s literature studies in Britain and a respected author, critic and translator. His wide-ranging collection, built up over 60 years of collecting, is believed to be the largest privately-owned
The donation is a mark of Brian’s long-standing and ongoing support for both Newcastle University and Seven Stories. Remarking on the donation, Brian said: “with the university’s scholarly interests in children’s literature and historic children’s book collections, and with Seven Stories being the national home of contemporary children’s books, I am delighted to be able to augment the city’s presence in fostering interest in what is an unduly neglected subject.”

**Complementary acquisitions**

We are also developing a complementary approach to our acquisition of literary archives. Newcastle University Library has a growing literary archive collection, with particular strengths in poetry through recent acquisitions of the Iron Press, Flambard Press and Bloodaxe Books archives. Seven Stories is looking to expand its children’s poetry holdings, and colleagues in Newcastle University’s Special Collections are sharing their experience of working with poetry archives.

And, both organisations are looking to identify archives where through our partnership, we can represent authors and poets who have written for both children and adults.

**Supporting collections research**

Through our partnership, we are developing new opportunities for research into the collections.

**An award-winning Knowledge Transfer Partnership**

From October 2015 to December 2016, Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children’s Books and Newcastle University’s School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics collaborated on an innovative Knowledge Transfer Partnership, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships are an InnovateUK scheme that connects businesses with higher education institutions and supports business development, growth and innovation. The aim of Seven Stories’ KTP was to develop a research-led approach to its exhibitions and collections, and enable them to attract adult audiences.

KTP Research Associate Dr Jessica Medhurst conducted research and supported interpretation for the *Michael Morpurgo: a lifetime in stories* exhibition, which is on display at the V&A Museum of Childhood until 25 February 2018. The KTP also supported Seven Stories’ planning for two further exhibitions, supported adult events and learning projects, and enhanced the School of English’s undergraduate teaching.

Thought to be the first English Literature KTP in the UK, the initiative was named the Knowledge Exchange / Transfer Initiative of the Year at the Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Awards 2017.

**Fully-funded PhD opportunities**

Seven Stories is working with the Northern Bridge Doctoral Training Partnership to offer a fully-funded Partnership Award PhD studentship opportunity, focusing on the Seven Stories Collection.

The Partnership Award initiative is a first for the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Doctoral Training Partnership scheme and offers students the opportunity to conduct their PhD research, supervised by Newcastle University, Durham University or Queen’s University Belfast, in collaboration with a partner organisation.
We’ve also worked together to secure a funded PhD studentship through Newcastle University’s Research Excellence Academy scheme, focusing on Judith Kerr’s juvenilia in the Seven Stories Collection, and a PhD studentship through the AHRC’s National Productivity Investment Fund looking at reimagining children’s spaces with the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape.

Enhancing the student experience

Beyond research activities, the Seven Stories Collection supports several courses and programmes at Newcastle University.

Collaborations around taught courses

Newcastle University’s third year BA in English Literature module, Home, heritage, history: 20th century children’s literature, is an example of how Seven Stories’ Collection is being used to support teaching innovation. Lecturer in Children’s Literature Dr Lucy Pearson redeveloped the mid-module assignment so that it was inspired by fieldwork undertaken through a visit to Seven Stories. The assessment, which asked students to consider exhibition design and engaging public audiences with archival material, “obliged the students to think about a broader, living context for literature and an audience for their own writing.” (Professor Jennifer Richards, Newcastle University).

And our collections support students from beyond Newcastle too. This summer, the University of Washington’s Information School Masters students undertook workshops with both Seven Stories’ Collection and Newcastle University’s Special Collections on a study abroad module called: Wizards, Whizzpoppers and Whangdoodles: children’s literature in the UK.

Supporting student employability

Beyond contributing to formal taught classes, Seven Stories’ Collections team is providing a range of placements to Newcastle University students.

In 2016/17, Seven Stories offered Collections placements to the MA in Museums, Galleries and Heritage studies, and as part of the undergraduate Career Development Module which is open to students from a range of disciplines. These placements, which were attached to academic credits, contributed directly to the students’ degree marks.

Career Development Module student Charlie Shovlar said: “There has been the opportunity to develop so many skills. I noticed my work ethic improving a great deal, and my planning and organisational skills have come on miles.”
Students can also take on volunteering or funded placements for their own personal and professional development. The Seven Stories Collections Team is currently hosting a six-month Northern Bridge student placement, and has offered opportunities as part of the Santander Universities Internship scheme.

Engaging with our community

Working with schools
The University Library’s Outreach team has been working in partnership with the Collections team at Seven Stories to enhance recent learning projects around fairytales and alphabet books.

With both projects, historical and archival children’s literature material inspired the schoolchildren to create their own stories. One of the teachers who participated in the fairytales project said that their students had “been given access to so many different areas which have, and will continue, to inspire them.”

Exhibitions and events
Alongside exhibitions at Seven Stories’ visitor centre, which have been supported by the Knowledge Transfer Partnership, the Philip Robinson Library showcased some of the treasures of the Brian Alderson collection in a summer 2017 exhibition curated by Brian, A Lilliputian Miscellany.

We offer a range of joint events, where members of the public can explore our collections; from our Looking at Children’s Books lectures held at the university library, to our Hopes and Fears in Children’s Books event at Seven Stories, part of the 2016 Being Human Festival of the Humanities.

In November 2017, Newcastle University’s Institute for Social Renewal and Seven Stories are also presenting a joint symposium: Diverse Voices? Curating a National History of Children’s Books. Part of Freedom City, a festival across Newcastle which marks 50 years since Newcastle University awarded Dr Martin Luther King an honorary doctorate, the event will explore children’s literature and race. Speakers include Jake Hope, Catherine Johnson, Patrice Lawrence, S.I. Martin, Beverley Naidoo, Professor Karen Sands O’Connor, Alex Wheatle MBE and Verna Wilkins.

Exploring new technologies
And Seven Stories is drawing on the university’s expertise to interpret and present its collection using new digital platforms. In 2016, the partnership explored virtual reality technologies to launch The Catherine Storr Experience, available at: http://digitalcultures.ncl.ac.uk/Catherine-Storr/, which presents the life, work and collection of children’s author Catherine Storr.

Seven Stories, which holds Catherine Storr’s archive, worked with Professor of Children’s Literature, Kim Reynolds, who developed the content for The Catherine Storr Experience, and Dr Tom Schofield from Digital Cultures in Culture Lab and collaborator Dan Foster Smith, who provided the digital expertise. The result is an immersive and atmospheric digital experience.

The Vital North Partnership in numbers

- 1 Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Award
- 1 children’s literature collection jointly acquired
- 3 national festivals participated in
- 3 fully-funded PhD studentship opportunities offered
- 4 exhibitions supported by Vital North Partnership activity
- 9 research collaborations
- 9 taught undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes engaged with
- 20 joint events delivered
- 15 student placements and internships
- 27 Vital North Partnership blog posts published https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/vitalnorth/
- Over 60,000 event and exhibition visitors
- Over £750,000 worth of activity generated

Based on activity from 2015 to end of September 2017.