

# Lillian Helena Smith

b. Mar. 17, 1887, London, ON; d. Jan. 5, 1983, Toronto, ON



Lillian Helena Smith, c.1920s. Credit Toronto Public Library

## Education:

1910 BA (Victoria University, Toronto)

1910-1911 certificate (Carnegie Training School for Children's Librarians, Pittsburgh)

1931 BS in LS (Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh)

## Positions:

1911-1912 Children's librarian and branch head, New York Public Library

1912-1952 Head of children's services, Toronto Public Library

## Publications:

Smith, Lillian H. (1913). "Boys and girls and the public library." *Proceedings of the Ontario Library Association Annual Meeting*: 67-70.

Smith, Lillian H. (1917). "The children's librarian." *Acta Victoriana* 42, 2: 63-65.

Smith, Lillian H. (1917). "A list of books for boys and girls." *Ontario Library Review* 2, no.1: 11-33.

Smith, Lillian H. (1923). "The problems of children's librarians." *Library Journal* 48, 17, 1 October.: 805-806.

Smith, Lillian H., ed. (1927). *Books for boys and girls*. Toronto: Toronto Public Library.

Smith, Lillian H. (1932). "The teaching of children's literature." In: *American Library Association*

Children's Library Yearbook, vol. 4: 73-80.

Smith, Lillian H., ed. (1932). Books for boys and girls, June 1927 to June 1932, a supplement. Toronto: Toronto Public Library

Smith, Lillian H. (1939). "The library's responsibility to the child." In: The library of tomorrow: a symposium, ed. Emily M. Danton. Chicago: American Library Association. p. 124-132.

Smith, Lillian H., ed. (1940). Books for boys and girls. 2nd ed. Toronto: Ryerson Press.

Smith, Lillian H. and Annie Wright (1941). "Canada: a reading guide for children and young people." Ontario Library Review 25, 1 August: 293-300.

Smith, Lillian H. (1947). "The children's library." Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada 24, 2 February: 56-58.

Smith, Lillian H. (1953). The unreluctant years: a critical approach to children's literature. Chicago: American Library Association.

Smith, Lillian H. (1959). "What books mean to children." American Library Association Bulletin 53, 4 April: 289-91.

Smith, Lillian H. (1963). "News from Narnia." Horn Book Magazine 39, October: 470-73.

## **Associations/Committees:**

1928-1929 President, Ontario Library Association

1932-1936 Member of Executive Board, American Library Association

## **Honours:**

Clarence Day Award, American Library Association, in 1962 for outstanding work in encouraging the love of books and reading.

Toronto Public Library established the Lillian H. Smith Collection in 1962, as a tribute to her years of work at Boys and Girls House.

The Lillian H. Smith branch of Toronto Public Library opened on 16 October 1995 in honour of the first academically trained children's librarian in the British Empire.

## **Accomplishments:**

Lillian Smith became the first Canadian children's librarian with academic credentials when she began her career at Toronto Public Library in 1912. By the time of her retirement, TPL was providing book services at Boys and Girls House, 16 library branches, 2 settlement houses, 30 school libraries, and two hospitals. The quality of services at Boys and Girls House so much impressed Edgar Osborne, a British librarian and collector, that he donated 1800 children's books to TPL in 1949, the nucleus of

today's outstanding collections at the Lillian H. Smith branch on College Street. Smith made valuable contributions to the American and Ontario library associations in children's and youth services and was instrumental in forming the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians in 1939.

"The Unreluctant Years," published in 1953, distills Smith's ideas about library book selection and its potential to edify and stimulate children. Her book remains a classic statement for the rationale to apply critical standards of literary value in book selection for young readers and for her insistence on the provision and employment of 'best books' by children's librarians. Smith also edited valuable editions of TPL's "Books for Boys and Girls."

Storytelling and programming was another vital aspect of library work that Smith and her devoted staff actively promoted. A 'Book Week' for boys and girls became a regular feature before Christmas at TPL well before a national Young Canada Book Week was established in 1949. As well, from the end of WWII to the 1950s, librarians at Boys and Girls House collaborated with the CBC in a series of radio programs for children. Service to non-English speaking children was provided through Toronto settlement houses. Boys and Girls House was always noted for its experimental approaches and offerings of drama, folk dancing, puppet shows, and clubs—features that are often taken for granted in the 21st century library.

## Comments:

"Miss Lillian H. Smith long envisioned a nation-wide association for the advancement of children's reading in Canada and, at a joint conference of the Ontario and Quebec Library Associations, held in Montreal in the year 1939, she took action to make such an organization a 'fait accompli.'" – Ruth Milne, "C.A.C.L. Tribute," 1952.

"Every parent in Toronto should be grateful to Miss Smith." – Charles Sanderson, Chief Librarian, Toronto Public Library, 1953.

"She loves and understands children; knows how they think and what interest them. Among her associates, she has had the faculty of inspiring loyalty and transmitting enthusiasm—gifts which do much to explain her success." – Toronto Globe and Mail editorial, 1952.

## Sources:

[Lillian H. Smith website](#) developed by Michael Manchester. Accessed November 15, 2025.

Fasick, Adele. M., Margaret Johnston and Ruth Osler, eds. (1990). *Lands of pleasure: essays on Lillian H. Smith and the development of children's libraries*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.

Canadian Association of Children's Librarians (1952). *Lillian H. Smith; a tribute from the C.A.C.L.*, June 10, 1952. Ottawa: Canadian Library Association.

McGrath, Leslie A. (2005). *Service to children in the Toronto Public Library; a case study, 1912-1949*. University of Toronto Ph.D. dissertation.

Sydell Waxman (2002). *Believing in books: the story of Lillian H. Smith*. Toronto: Napoleon Publishing. [biography for children]

Giles, Suzette (2013). "Libraries named after librarians." *ELAN* no. 54 (Fall): 7-8.

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