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Building worlds at your local public library

A joint editorial by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly and State Librarian Tessa Michaelson Schmidt

When we were children, we both loved going to our local public libraries. If our parents wondered where we were, chances were pretty good that they could find us in the corner of the library, nose in a book, mind traveling on a new adventure found in its pages. Reading connected us to a wider world and helped us understand our place in it; libraries made that possible.

Today, many years later, they still do. Public libraries are spaces that are open to all, spaces where people come to connect – connect with stories, with ideas, and with each other. All stories – in the form of books, audiobooks, music, movies, conversations with your neighbor you meet in the checkout line – create connection and empathy. If a book opens you up to new experiences, it gives you the opportunity to explore another perspective; if it reflects your own experience back at you, it gives you the opportunity to deepen your own understanding of yourself. Often, stories exist along this spectrum, both stretching perspective and reflecting self, and that insight is powerful. Libraries are also home to a spectrum of ideas. When you engage with books or music or movies or newspapers at your local libraries, you will find materials that affirm your own beliefs, and you will find materials that challenge them. What a gift to be able to access a diversity of thought! Beyond materials, our local libraries connect people to each other through learning opportunities, for assistance in accessing services, and to build community.

When an author writes fantasy or science fiction, part of their creativity is worldbuilding, the process of constructing a fictional universe for their characters to inhabit and for their storyline to play out within. In many ways, libraries build worlds, too, because they connect us to stories, ideas, and people we would otherwise have never known. Public libraries enrich our world by deepening our understanding of the real and the imagined, the other and the self, and new and the old; in doing so, they strengthen our state. They are small-d democratic institutions rooted in – and responsive to – their communities. That is why we at the

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Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction support equity of access to library materials and freedom to read for all Wisconsin residents across their lifetimes. This National Library Week, visit your public library and see how your world expands! And while you're there, take a moment to thank your local library workers!

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NOTE: Headshots for publication are available upon request. This guest editorial is available electronically at <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2022/building-worlds-your-local-public-library>.