

Genre Informational Text

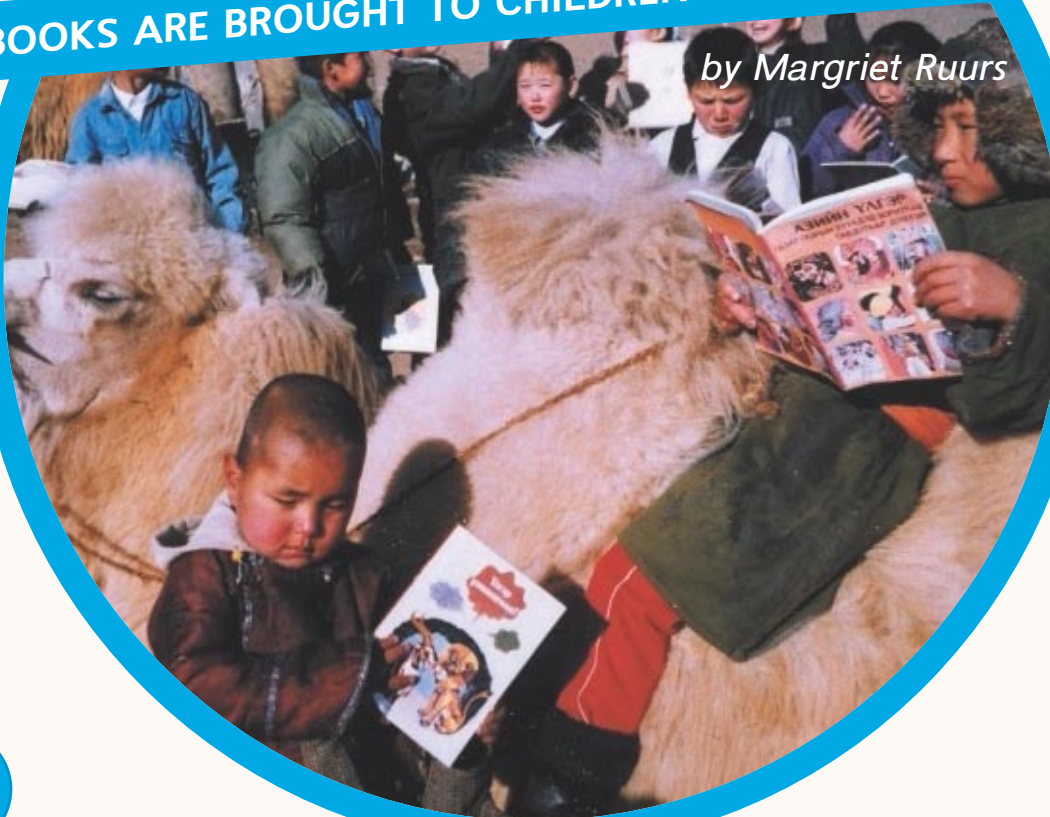
Essential Questions

Why are books important? How can a love for reading bring people together?

My Librarian Is a Camel

HOW BOOKS ARE BROUGHT TO CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD

by Margriet Ruurs



Several years ago, I read a newspaper article about a camel in Kenya that was used to bring books to young people who lived in remote desert villages. I wondered how else books might be brought to children in other parts of the world. My research turned up all sorts of “mobile libraries”: libraries that moved on legs, on wheels, and by other means.

I was thrilled to learn how far people would go to put books into the hands of young readers. I began to contact librarians in faraway places. They responded by sharing information, personal stories, and photos of their mobile libraries and of the young people who use them. Over time, I assembled a scrapbook of mobile libraries from all over the world.

Developing this book has been a rewarding and exciting experience. From Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, I discovered people who are passionate about books and who understand the importance of libraries in our lives. One librarian in Azerbaijan explained that the library is “as important as air or water.”

Maybe you have been taking your local library for granted, just as I did. Next time you borrow books, think of how lucky you are to be able to choose from all of those free books and to take home as many as you wish.

The librarians and volunteers who bring books by camel or elephant or by boat inspired me. I hope they inspire you, too.



Commonwealth of Australia

Capital: Canberra

Estimated Population: 23,000,000



The smallest continent in the world, Australia lies southeast of Asia. Because the continent is in the Southern Hemisphere, the seasons are opposite to those in the Northern Hemisphere. Summer begins on December 1. Winter begins on June 1. The official language is English, but there are also hundreds of Aboriginal languages spoken, the languages of Australia's native people.



Australia

In Australia, there are more than five thousand libraries. About seventy-two of those libraries are on wheels. Some mobile libraries cover the Gold Coast, a strip of beaches in the state of Queensland that runs north from the border with New South Wales toward Brisbane, the state capital. Huge trucks and trailers carry thousands of books to children who cannot go to a library in a city.

Travis, a librarian, travels on one of the trucks. He stops at schools to talk about books and to tell stories.

“Some stories leave children with something to think about,” says Travis. “Others bring laughter or tears.” Stories can get kids excited about books and reading, so they borrow lots of books.

The mobile library that Travis runs is more than a truck. It is a solar-powered high-tech library. The solar panel is on the top of the truck. Inside are six computers and a printer powered by a UPS (uninterrupted power supply) unit, which is charged from a bank of batteries.

The truck comes with three air-conditioning units, two banks of fluorescent lights, nine spotlights, and a stereo system with surround sound. It also features a wheelchair lift, a microwave oven, a small refrigerator, a toilet, and two sinks. All of these units are powered by a bank of constantly recharging batteries. The solar panel provides a small current to the batteries that keeps them alive and running.

Republic of Azerbaijan

Capital: Baku



Estimated population: 9,417,000

Azerbaijan lies in southwest Asia. This former republic of the Soviet Union became independent in 1991. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan

has been torn by civil conflict. People speak Azerbaijani, but Russian is also spoken, mostly in the capital of the country.



Azerbaijan

The children in the Kelenterli refugee settlement can't sit still when they know that the blue truck is coming! The blue truck library is here, thanks to the hard work of Relief International, an organization that provides relief to victims of natural disasters and civil conflicts.

These children live in poverty, but the blue library truck brings a surge of happiness and curiosity. "It's a big event when the library comes to town," says

the librarian. "It's a bit of happiness for children who normally don't have much to look forward to."

This library-in-a-truck has been bringing books to children for several years. Designed to provide a wide variety of books to young people, two library trucks serve over sixteen hundred students in about twenty-three refugee schools. Their goal is simple: for a few hours each week, the children of Kelenterli and other settlements are given the opportunity to borrow books. In doing so, they may feel they are part of a new generation growing up in a new Azerbaijan. The trucks travel through only two regions of Azerbaijan. There are children in other areas of the country who would love to see the blue truck pay them a visit. But unfortunately, there are not enough trucks, or books, to reach them all. Relief International is working to change that.

"For us," says the librarian, "the mobile library is as important as air or water."



Canada

Nunavut, which means “Our Land” in the language of the Inuit people, is a huge territory in Canada’s north. The arctic region stretches from the North Pole to Arviat in the south, and from Kugluktuk in the west to Panjnirtung in the east. The distances are huge, and many villages are very isolated. The Northwest Territories reach from Nunavut in the east to the Yukon in the west.

Larger towns like Iqaluit, Tuktoyaktuk, and Yellowknife have their own public-library buildings, but many communities are just too small. Some communities, like Fort Liard, have a virtual library, which offers Internet access. But even if the community does not have any kind of library building, the Northwest Territories public library system offers books to everyone in the far north through their Borrower-by-Mail program.

Tyson Anakvik, Colin Igutaaq, James Naikak, and Cameron Ovilok are friends in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. They request library books by e-mail or by phone. A mobile library doesn’t bring the books to their village; the books are sent through the mail. The Borrower-by-Mail program will send children any books they’d like to read. If the library doesn’t have a book in its system, librarians will borrow the book from another library in Canada and mail it. They even include a stamped, addressed envelope, so the children won’t have to pay to return the book.



The boys take their young friend Liza for a ride on their sled as they walk to the post office to pick up their books. The boys look forward to reading that night. On winter days, the sun does not come above the horizon, and when the thermometer reads minus 50 degrees, the children like to curl up with a good book by the wood stove. While the northern wind howls across the tundra, they read fantasy and action novels. Liza is excited about finding good picture books in the package.

They can keep their books for up to six weeks. After that, they'll pack them up and walk to the local post office to mail the books back to the library. Then they'll check the mail every day . . . until another big brown package arrives with new books to devour in their remote corner of Canada's Arctic.

Canada

Capital: Ottawa

Estimated population: 35,000,000

Canada, located in North America, is the second largest country in the world. The most easterly point of Newfoundland is closer to England than it is to Calgary, Alberta. From east to west, Canada is so wide that there are six time zones within its borders. Canada has two official languages, English and French, and native Canadians also speak their own languages. The original people of the North are called Inuit, and they speak Inuktitut.



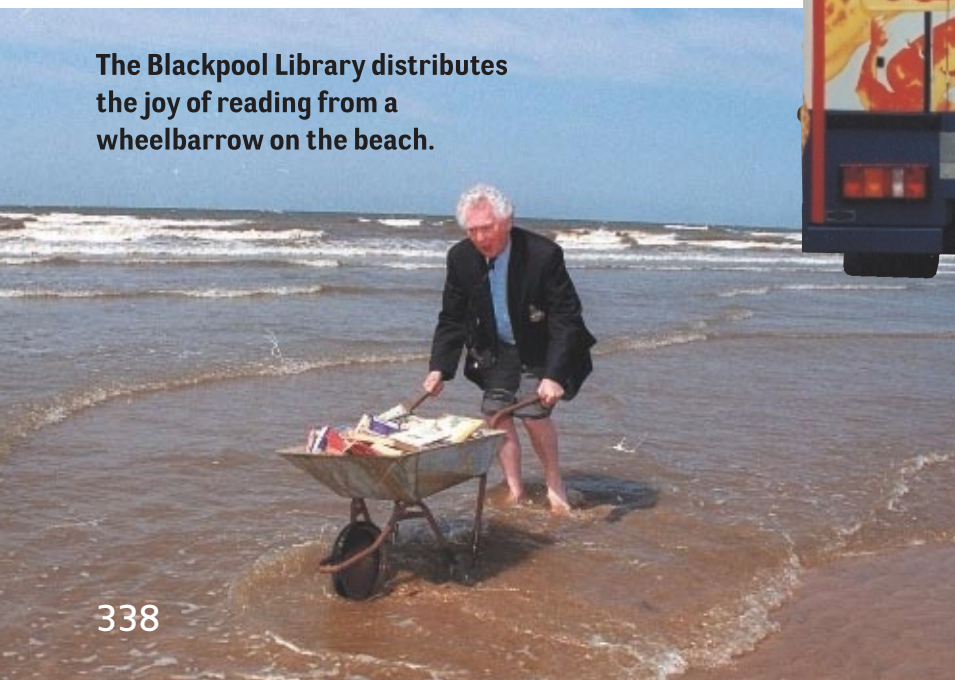
England

The Blackpool Beach Library brings books directly to people who are enjoying their summer holiday at the beach. The library is a wheelbarrow!

Two library assistants cart the books up and down the beach. Borrowers needn't join the Blackpool Library. When they finish reading the books, they simply return them to the wheelbarrow when it comes by another day. The people at the Blackpool Library believe that it is important to promote the joy of reading. "Libraries are services, not buildings," says one librarian. So, besides donkey rides and lemonade stands, this beach offers books!

England has other types of mobile libraries as well. Share-a-Book is a children's mobile library van in Gloucester, a county in England. A librarian travels with the van to the countryside, where children don't have access to a regular public library. Many children don't have books at home to read and share with their parents. Share-a-Book has special books for children for whom English is a second language. They also offer toddler story times and take part in special celebrations in the area.

The Blackpool Library distributes the joy of reading from a wheelbarrow on the beach.



England

Capital: London

Estimated Population: 59,000,000

England is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom lies off the northwestern coast of Europe. England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland form the United Kingdom. The official language is English, but some people in Wales speak Welsh, and some people in Scotland speak Gaelic.



Gloucester's mobile library.



Republic of Finland

Capital: Helsinki

Estimated population: 5,482,000

Finland lies in North Europe. At least a third of the country is north of the Arctic Circle. It is known as “the land of lakes and islands” for good reason. Finland has more than fifty-five thousand lakes, and many



thousands of islands. The country has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. Other languages include Lappish and Romany.



Finland

The south coast of Finland skirts the Gulf of Finland. The archipelago, in the southwest, consists of thousands of rocky islands. Some islands have only summer visitors, but others are populated year-round. People in this area of Finland speak both Finnish and Swedish. Since 1976, the Pargas Library has been bringing books to the people of these islands by book boat: *Bokbåt* in Swedish or *Kirjastovene* in Finnish.

The boat, called *Kalkholm*, meaning “Limestone Island” in Swedish, measures 4 meters wide and 12 meters long. It carries about six hundred books. The boat, with a crew consisting of a librarian and an assistant, sails among the islands, making about ten stops. Kids come scrambling down the rocky shores to collect their books. Since winters are severe in Finland, the boat goes out only from May to October.

Maj-Len, the chief librarian in Pargas Stad, oversees the operation of the book boat. “Reading has become very important to our book-boat children,” she says. “If the book boat didn’t come, they might not be reading at all. They are always happy to see us and their supply of new books.”



Indonesia

Among the many islands of Indonesia, rivers are the main means of transportation. So it is no wonder that some libraries here float on rivers.

The country has seven floating libraries. The Kalimantan Floating Library consists of a wooden boat, 8 meters long and 3 meters wide. The boat, which is powered by a diesel engine, can carry up to five hundred books.

When the boat first began bringing books to the villages along the river Kahayun, it had to stay until people finished reading their books. That took too much time, so the librarians decided to leave behind containers filled with books. This allowed them to continue traveling the river, bringing books to other villages. Now the children in the villages along the river come running when the library boat tugs upstream. They are all excited about rummaging through a new box of books to read.

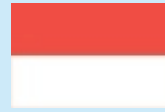
In the city of Surabaya, a bicycle library makes its rounds every day. The East Java Library Board decided that a bicycle was the most economical way to deliver books to readers. The library is powered by man and environmentally friendly. The bicycle makes it easy to get around the narrow, winding streets of the city. It carries books and promotes reading around the city, at schools in the countryside, in villages and kampongs, which are urban communities designed to look like villages in the countryside. Children and their parents can borrow books from the bicycle library and exchange them the next time the library visits.

Republic of Indonesia

Capital: Jakarta

Estimated Population: 258,316,000

Indonesia consists of many islands. It is the largest group of islands in the world, consisting of more than 17,500 islands that lie between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The islands of Indonesia include Sumatra, Borneo, Java, Bali, Timor, and many more. The people speak a language called Bahasa Indonesian, but there are also more than two hundred other languages spoken, including English.



Republic of Kenya

Capital: Nairobi

Estimated population: 46,790,000



Kenya is a country in East Africa. Kenya's climate varies. The coast, which lies on the Indian Ocean, is hot and humid.



Inland, the climate is temperate, but the northern part of the country is dry. The official language is English. The national language is Kiswahili.

Kenya

The roads to Bulla Iftin, two hundred miles northeast of Nairobi, are impassable because of the desert sand, even for cars with four-wheel drive. But young people who live in nomadic villages in the area are hungry for books. So librarians use the most economical means of transportation—camels!

Library camels are on the road five days a week. They can carry heavy loads and need little water in the heat of the desert. One camel may carry as many as five hundred books, weighing about four hundred pounds. A driver and a librarian divide the books into two boxes. They

saddle them on the camel's back, which is covered with a grass mat for protection. A second camel carries a tent that serves as the library roof.

The students of Bulla Iftin eagerly await the arrival of the camels. When the library caravan finally reaches the village, the children watch as the librarian pitches the tent and displays the books on wooden shelves. The librarian places the grass mats on the ground in the shade of an acacia tree, making a place where the children can sit. The students can treasure their new books for two weeks. When the library camels return, the children can trade their books for new ones.

These camels are ready to bring books to children in remote villages



Thailand

In Omkoi, a region of northern Thailand, there are no schools or libraries. Tribal people cannot read or write. The government of Thailand hopes to change that with a literacy program that includes bringing books to remote villages in the jungle.

A number of these villages can be reached only on foot. This makes transportation difficult, especially during the rainy season. How do you get books to people who need them most when they live in hard-to-reach mountainous regions of northern Thailand? Elephants!

The Chiangmai Non-Formal Education Center had the idea to use elephants as libraries. Elephants are already being used here to plow the paddy fields and to carry logs and crops. Now more than twenty elephants in the Omkoi region are used to carry books. The elephant teams spend two to three days in each village. Each trip covers seven or eight villages, so it takes each elephant team eighteen to twenty days to complete a round-trip.

The elephant library is headed for remote villages in northern Thailand



The Books-by-Elephant delivery program serves thirty-seven villages, providing education for almost two thousand people in the Omkoi region. They have even designed special metal slates that won't break when carried on the elephants' backs across the rough terrain.

These slates are used to teach Thai children to write and read. (There are also two-person teams carrying books to about sixteen villages, bringing learning materials to another six hundred people.)

In Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, old train carriages have been transformed into a library. The train is called *Hong Rotfai Yoawachon*, which means "Library Train for Young People." The train serves the homeless children of Bangkok. The Railway Police Division in Bangkok realized there was a need for a safe place for street children, so they refurbished the old train carriages at the railway station, where many of the kids were hanging out. The police restored the trains to their old glory, complete with wood paneling and shining copper light fixtures. They turned the railway cars into a library and a classroom. Here the children learn to read and write. The police have even transformed the area around the train into a garden, where they grow herbs and vegetables.

Kingdom of Thailand

Capital: Bangkok

Estimated population: 68,200,000

Thailand (Tie-land), which means "the land of the free," lies in Southeast Asia. The climate varies from season to season: dry in January and February, hot in March and May, wet from June to October, and cool in November and December. The official language of the country is Thai.



Zimbabwe

Many small communities are spread throughout rural Zimbabwe. Bulawayo is a city within the Bulawayo province in western Zimbabwe between North and South Matabeleland provinces. Outside of Bulawayo, there are few paved roads. People travel either on foot or by donkey cart along the sandy trails. And donkey carts carry library books as well.

Rachel, a library volunteer, worked in Bulawayo. Once a week she would load boxes of books onto a small wooden cart drawn by a donkey: the Nkayi Donkey Mobile Library Cart. The Rural Libraries and Resources Development Programme is hoping to nurture reading skills among the young people of rural Zimbabwe. The donkey cart can reach small communities that are inaccessible to vehicles because of the bad roads. Boxes of books delivered by donkey cart are left at schools in different communities for a month at a time.

“We would load boxes of books into the cart,” Rachel says, “and walk for hours along the dusty roads to reach different villages. We’d leave the books in the local schools. Then the children and adults would come to the schools to check out the books. We tried to keep the library running on a regular schedule.” Rachel adds, laughing, “But sometimes we couldn’t catch the donkeys, and then we’d be late!”



One of the Rural Libraries and Resources Programme's brand-new carts is a donkey-driven electro-communications library cart! It brings not only books but also a solar-powered TV and VCR to children who have never watched TV in their lives. The library plans to add a computer and satellite dish to bring Internet and fax capabilities to this semiarid region of Zimbabwe in the near future.

Rachel was not surprised that the children enjoyed picture books. Since this is an agricultural society, older readers want books on farming. Books in the native Ndebele language are very popular, as are good books from the West. But the children like African literature the best, even if it is in English.

Librarians promote literacy in rural Zimbabwe



Republic of Zimbabwe

Capital: Harare

Estimated population: 14,547,000

Zimbabwe (zim-BAHB-way), a landlocked country in southern Africa, is bordered by Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zambia. Most of Zimbabwe consists of high plateau, known as the High Veld. The official language is English, but people also speak Shona and Ndebele, native languages from the Bantu family of languages.



Children in Zimbabwe, like children everywhere, love a good book to read

You will answer the comprehension questions on these pages as a class.

Text Connections

1. Which librarians have the hardest job in “My Librarian Is a Camel,” and why do you think so?
2. How is the Blackpool Beach Library somewhat different from the other libraries in “My Librarian Is a Camel”?
3. Why do you think many mobile libraries provide computer and television access, as well as access to books?
4. How do both “My Librarian Is a Camel” and “The House Baba Built” point to the importance of stories during difficult circumstances?
5. Choose one place described in “My Librarian Is a Camel,” and explain how you would feel about getting library books if you lived there.
6. How does having library access change the lives of one town or group of people in “My Librarian Is a Camel”?

Did You Know?

Depending on how you measure “largest” (by amount of shelf space or by number of holdings), the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the British Library in London, England, vie for the title of “World’s Largest Library.”



Write

Write a review of your favorite book, recommending it to a child from one of the locations mentioned in "My Librarian Is a Camel."

Look Closer

Keys to Comprehension

1. Make an inference about how mobile libraries tend to affect children's likelihood to read. Quote accurately from the text to support your inference.
2. Describe the interactions between the Railway Police Division in Bangkok, Thailand, and the homeless children that live in that city, based on specific information in "My Librarian Is a Camel."

Writer's Craft

3. Explain what the term "mobile library" means, and give examples of mobile libraries from the text.
4. Analyze several accounts of mobile libraries in "My Librarian Is a Camel." Compare and contrast the people's points of view about their mobile libraries.

Concept Development

5. In "One Fantastic Journey," Nellie Bly travels from Singapore to Hong Kong. Imagine she travels overland along Thailand and her train breaks down. Use the information in "My Librarian Is a Camel" to solve her problem and suggest an alternative transportation source.
6. How does the author give reasons to support the idea that people love having access to books, no matter where they live?



Read this Social Studies Connection. You will answer the questions as a class.

Text Feature

Informational texts often **boldface** important terms.

The Story of the Library

Where and when was the first library? The answer to this is tricky, because it depends on what you mean by *library*. Collections of records and books have been around a very long time, but free public libraries have existed for less than two hundred years.

The English word *library*, meaning “a place for books,” has its roots in *liber*, the Latin word for “book.” For many years, various cultures had libraries of tablets and scrolls—the “books” of their day. During the European Middle Ages and Renaissance, books were expensive and only religious orders, schools, and the wealthy owned libraries.

In the 1700s, a new fashion for club-like **subscription libraries** grew. They generally cost money up front, and there was an ongoing yearly fee afterward. In 1731, the first North American subscription library was founded. Subscription libraries became a solution to the problem of expensive books. By pooling resources, members had the capability to access books they could not otherwise afford.

Subscription libraries usually focused on scholarly books. Newspapers, magazines, and novels became more and more popular through the late 1700s and early 1800s, but they were too expensive for ordinary people. The answer was the **circulating library**, a place where people rented popular materials for a very small fee. As buying books became more economical, people stopped renting them, and circulating libraries died out.

The idea for a **free public library** came to Rev. Abiel Abbot in 1833. He presented his idea for a library paid for by taxes at a town meeting in New Hampshire. Free public libraries began popping up across the United States and in other countries. Today, the International Federation of Library Associations helps to promote and develop public library systems everywhere. Public libraries are now ubiquitous around the world, and are here to stay.



Public libraries have continued to transform. Today, many libraries provide access to ebooks, computers, and even scientific equipment like telescopes and microscopes.

1. What are the roots of the library system as we know it today?
2. How has the world changed since the days of subscription and circulating libraries?
3. What can we learn by studying the history of libraries?



Go Digital

Research to find out about electronic libraries, also known as e-libraries. Why are e-libraries an important innovation?