

# home run research

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*"Home Run Research" offers short columns that present new, original research in a digestible, easy-to-understand way, research that has implications for librarians and others interested in literacy development.*

Nilson, Peterson, and Searfoss (1980) attempted to see whether children's literature that was highly thought of by adults was popular among children. They assembled a list of books "highly acclaimed by critics" (530) from the years 1951 to 1975, books that were on the American Library Association's Distinguished Children's Books lists, the list of the Best Books of the Year compiled by *School Library Journal*, winners of the Newbery and Caldecott awards, and other sources. Added to this list were books selected by a librarian that were "known to be well liked" by the children in her school library. These are referred to below as "well-liked books."

Book popularity was determined by ten children's librarians in Phoenix, Arizona, who were asked to rate the popularity of each book, judging each as "popular" (book checked out regularly, given two points) or "unpopular" ("I can hardly remember the book," zero points.) Nilson, Peterson, and Searfoss then assembled lists for each year, from 1951 to 1975, containing books published that year along with rankings based on popularity scores. We present one of their lists, containing books published in 1970 (see table 1).

Visual inspection of the list shows that the acclaimed books (indicated by an asterisk) are closer to the bottom of the list, and the well-liked books are closer to the top.

Our goal in this study was to attempt to quantify the difference between the two groups of books and to employ statistical tests to determine whether or to what extent the acclaimed

## Is Acclaimed Children's Literature Popular Among Children? A Secondary Analysis of Nilson, Peterson, and Searfoss

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and well-liked books differed in popularity. In other words, this is a secondary analysis, a reanalysis of previously published data using tools not employed by the original investigators.

We illustrate our method by considering the books listed in table 1. We first calculated the average rank of the well-liked books by summing the ranks for these books and dividing by the number of well-liked books listed. For table 1, there were six well-liked books (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7) and their ranks totaled 23. Dividing 23 by 6 gives an average rank of 3.83. Similarly, books 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 were acclaimed (indicated by an asterisk in table 1). The total of their ranks was 55. Dividing 55 by 6 gives an average rank of 9.6. In other words, well-liked were judged to be more

**Table 1**  
Acclaimed and Well-Liked Books Published in 1970  
(from Nilson, Peterson, and Searfoss)

Title	Score
<i>Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret</i> (Blume)	20
<i>Runaway Ralph</i> (Cleary)	19
<i>A Bargain for Frances</i> (Hoban)	17
<i>Animals Should Definitely Not Wear Clothing</i> (Barrett)	17
* <i>Frog and Toad Are Friends</i> (Lobel)	16
<i>The Snake That Sneezed</i> (Leydenfrost)	16
<i>Summer of the Swans</i> (Byars)	9
* <i>The Trumpet of the Swan</i> (White)	8
* <i>In the Night Kitchen</i> (Sendak)	7
* <i>Sing Down the Moon</i> (O'Dell)	3
* <i>The Marvelous Misadventures of Sebastian</i> (Alexander)	2
* <i>Knee Knock Rise</i> (Babbitt)	1

\* = acclaimed book

popular among children than the acclaimed books by the ten librarians.

The same procedure was repeated for books published each year, from 1951 to 1975. The results are presented in table 2. In every year except for 1962, well-liked books were rated as more popular than acclaimed books, and the difference in 1962 was very small. In other words: well-liked books were considered more popular in twenty-four years out of twenty-five.

**Clearly, the criteria used for declaring a children's book to be of high quality is not the same as the criteria children use to select what they read.**

An appropriate statistical test to use in this case is the sign test, which can be applied to ranks. The sign test tells us what the chances are that there is no difference between the groups; that is, what the chances are that the average rank of well-liked and acclaimed books is the same. Application of the sign test reveals that the odds are less than one in a million that this is true (for the statistically minded,  $p = .000000298$ ). The difference in ranks is obviously highly significantly different: acclaimed books are not as popular as those considered by librarians to be well-liked.

The sign test done on the ranks for books published each year controls for the year of publication. Another method of determining if the

**Table 2**  
Mean Rank for Well-liked and Acclaimed Books

Year	Popular	Prize
1975	3.83	9.17
1974	4.50	12.00
1973	2.50	7.50
1972	5.71	6.50
1971	5.00	6.57
1970	3.83	9.16
1969	4.80	7.71
1968	3.00	8.50
1967	5.67	8.14
1966	4.83	8.16
1965	3.25	8.13
1964	5.83	6.20
1963	5.17	6.00
1962	4.75	4.25
1961	3.83	5.00
1960	5.44	13.00
1959	3.00	7.5
1958	5.83	6.20
1957	3.83	7.33
1956	2.67	6.17
1955	3.00	6.60
1954	3.40	5.50
1953	4.40	4.67
1952	2.67	5.60
1951	2.50	6.00

Range = 0 to 20

difference between the well-liked and acclaimed books is real is to do a t-test comparing all well-liked books and all acclaimed books, using the popularity score (from 0 to 20 for each book). Table 3 presents descriptive statistics.

**Table 3**  
Mean Popularity Scores

	Acclaimed books	Well-liked books
Mean rating	6.19	12.38
Sd	4.97	5.44
N	126	136

The mean popularity scores were, of course, significantly different ( $t = 110.7$ ,  $df = 260$ ), far beyond the .0001 level of significance, confirming the results of the sign test.

Still another way of examining the difference is to compute a confidence interval. To determine the likelihood of an acclaimed book penetrating the well-liked book list, a 95 percent confidence interval was calculated for the set of well-liked books. The interval was 11.95 to 12.81, meaning that the odds of a well-liked book rating falling between 11.95 and 12.81 is 19 out of 20, or 95 percent. In other words, nearly all of the well-liked books got ratings between 11.95 and 12.81. The mean acclaimed book rating of 6.2 falls far outside this interval.

The results confirm Nilsen, Peterson, and Searfoss's claim that adult judgments of quality differ from children's tastes. In fact, 95 of the 136 critically acclaimed books received five or fewer popularity points. Clearly, the criteria used for declaring a children's book to be of high quality is not the same as the criteria children use to select what they read. ●

## Reference

- Nilsen, H., R. Peterson, and L. Searfoss.  
1980. "The Adult As Critic vs. The Child As Reader." *Language Arts* 57, no. 5: 530-39.