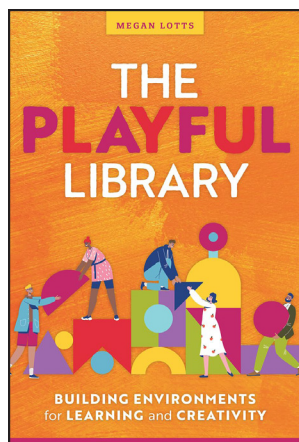


The Playful Library: Building Environments for Learning and Creativity, Megan Lotts. ALA Editions, 2024. Softcover, 136p. \$54.99. 9798892555715.



Megan Lotts' *The Playful Library: Building Environments for Learning and Creativity* frames play as a powerful tool for connection, growth, innovation, and reflection in libraries—a message that strikes a bittersweet note in 2025. While Lotts does not directly address the current political climate, it is difficult to read her book without this context in mind. Libraries across the United States find themselves under increased political scrutiny and have become sites of ideological controversy. The instinctual reaction to this movement may be to retreat and withdraw, sticking with controlled, tried-and-true forms of patron engagement and programming. Instead, *The Playful Library* invites library workers to embrace the spontaneity, creativity, experimentation, and human connection that arise when libraries cultivate playful spaces.

This joyful philosophy makes *The Playful Library* an inspiring read. The book draws from Lotts' extensive professional experience and research into play and creativity in libraries. While the author's background is in academic libraries, Lotts also envisions museums, public libraries, archives, K-12 schools, and professional conferences as potential spaces of play. The book is a practical text, a "primer" and "roadmap" (p. xi) that provides the reader with a wide range of applications for play. Lotts asks her readers to reflect on the buffet of ideas and to adapt those that best suit their own budgets, settings, and audiences.

The book's early chapters define play and present an argument for its place in libraries. "Play" is a nebulous concept and difficult to pin down. In chapter one, "What is Play?" Lotts provides several definitions, citing theorists who describe it as a mindset, a mode for engaging with an environment, and a social tool. Play is defined most clearly in contrast to work; "activities considered play are usually focused on learning and the joy of the activity itself, while activities we call work are often focused on results and subject to judgment and comparison" (p. 3). This element of intrinsic motivation is key to Lotts' framing of play and recurs throughout the book.

This flexible definition allows Lotts to position play as something that can enhance any and every aspect of library work. Libraries can facilitate play within its organizational structure, in library spaces, in the community, or even at home through circulating collections. The book's remaining six chapters provide a wide range of examples that demonstrate this flexibility, showcasing play in library teaching and assessment, community health and wellness, internal culture, games, makerspaces, and community engagement.

Through these examples, Lotts highlights the many benefits of play in libraries. Chapter three, "Play, Teaching, and Assessment," models play as a teaching tool that can inform how students approach research, as "the skills play strengthens are also needed for research and scholarly work" (p. 2). Through activities like six-word stories, which prompt students to "use six words and punctuation to share an idea, event, or moment" (p. 33), the author challenges students to articulate their research topics concisely, identify keywords, and adjust the scope of their research, all in an environment that encourages laughter, collaboration, and low-stakes trial and error.

A compelling theme throughout the book is how play reshapes the dynamic between librarian and learner. Instead of serving as a gatekeeper, the librarian becomes a facilitator

who creates an environment in which students can “take charge of their own learning” (p. 34), exploring, experimenting, and building their own connections with the material. This constructivist approach, which encourages library workers to “let go of the idea that you can control how people learn” (p. 30), is also evident throughout the book’s illustrations. These include a six-week virtual professional development program in which learners can choose their path through the materials and a show-and-tell activity where students work together to puzzle out information about a library’s services from a mystery bag full of library swag.

Lotts also frames play as a vehicle for community building. Chapter four, “Health and Wellness,” centers libraries as “cornerstones of their communities” that should use play to “support the health and wellness of our community members” (p. 49). Chapter eight, “Connecting Communities with Play,” underscores how play brings people together. A particularly telling example describes State Library Victoria’s relocation of its chess collection from a separate room to a former international student study space. Suddenly, older locals who used to play solo games were engaging with international students over chess boards. With its power to bridge divides and foster connection, play can help libraries fulfill their mission to strengthen communities.

The Playful Library is interspersed with reflection prompts that encourage readers to pause and “play” with ideas. One memorable prompt asks readers to imagine a dream floorplan of their library, built using only sweets. Another asks readers to reflect on their library’s existing “play community” and to identify a planning partner for a playful event. These questions of engagement provide opportunities to experience play as a means of reflection, innovation, and personalization.

Throughout the book, Lotts is careful to note challenges to fostering play in libraries, emphasizing the need for structure and shared rules to ensure fairness and respectful interactions. She also acknowledges the possibility of institutional roadblocks to creating a culture of play; however, the book assumes a receptive audience and does not spend much time exploring strategies to sway skeptical administrators. Instead, Lotts encourages her readers to embrace play when possible, and “try thinking of play like dressing on the side of a salad—just add as much as you like” (p. 1).

The Playful Library asserts that “play is not about violating tradition; it is about embracing the future and reflecting on how things work” (p. 115). It presents play as a diffuse concept that can sometimes feel difficult to fully grasp. However, a strong throughline of flexibility, experimentation, and exploration in service of meeting community needs is apparent throughout the book. Library workers can use play to test new ideas, invite community feedback, and break down internal silos. It can serve as connective tissue between diverse communities and breathe new life into underutilized spaces in the library. Lotts makes a powerful case for adopting a playful mindset to build thriving, inclusive, and joyful library spaces.—*Teresa Nesbitt, University of North Georgia*