

■ *MaryEllen Smith*

In 1981, an exceptional discovery was made in the Copyright Office's Deposit Collection. Audrey Fischer, who was then head of the Preservation Section, was preparing a collection of unpublished lectures spanning the years 1909 to 1977 for microfilming. Among those papers, Fischer came upon a series of fifty-three unpublished lectures by the pioneering child development and education scholar Maria Montessori. Registered in 1913–1914, the lectures' copyright had expired, making them available for research.

Montessori (1870–1952) became the first female physician in her native Italy, graduating from the University of Rome medical school in 1896. Through her medical practice, she became interested in the mechanisms by which children learn. Her curiosity inspired her to devote herself to the development of her eponymous method of childhood education. Since that time, her approach has been adopted by educators around the world.

The Montessori method assumes that children learn best by interacting with physical objects and by being respected as individuals.

Teachers of the method are essentially facilitators who allow children to learn at their own pace and thus develop their individual potential.



ABOVE: *Maria Montessori*

LEFT: *Lena Gitter*

Remarkably, a student of Montessori's, Lena Gitter, had been researching Montessori's philosophy at the Library for twenty years. A European-trained authority on the Montessori method, Gitter eventually published twelve books and numerous articles about the technique after she fled her native Austria for Washington, D.C., in 1938. A septuagenarian at the time the lectures were found, Gitter said, "It's very exciting for me to hear about these lectures after twenty years here . . . I never thought of looking in the Copyright Office." She added that the lectures "have value for the entire community of scholars in education and psychology."

"This is the greatest Christmas present in my life," she concluded. And it was the skill of the Copyright Office staff that made Gitter's holiday so memorable. ©

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION