
Helen E. Haines: A Life With Books

With this issue, *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (RUSQ) begins its fiftieth year of publication. In November of 1960, the first copy of what was then known as RQ (sometimes referred to as "Reference Quarterly") appeared "as an eight-page newsletter."¹ Since that time, the content and the presentation has expanded to its present format. Throughout its history as RQ, and later RUSQ, the journal has been essential to the forward progress of both the theory and the practice of reference librarianship, in the broadest sense of the phrase. While looking ahead is an important part of our work, an anniversary like this also reminds us that we should occasionally look back at where we are coming from. It is crucial that we not lose the best of our past as we move, increasingly rapidly, into a future that at times seems quite uncertain for libraries and librarians. The first volume of RQ was published from the fall of 1960 through summer of 1961. It was at the end of that summer that the library profession lost one of its luminaries, whose commitment to books and reading are still a model for readers' advisors today.

By the time of her death, Helen Haines had been forgotten by many in the field of librarianship, but her influence on libraries and on librarians remains an important one, and one that still speaks to the profession in the early twenty-first century. As readers' advisors are facing challenges ranging from budget cuts to rapidly expanding format choices to censorship, Haines's work in collection development and intellectual freedom offers insight into how we can make choices that support both our readers and our profession.

Haines began her work in the library profession in 1892, when she joined the staff at R.R. Bowker, working first as a secretary and then as assistant editor on a variety of publications, most importantly *Library Journal*. Initially working under the supervision of Charles Cutter, Haines became the journal's managing editor in 1896. At the same time, she also assumed duties as recorder for the American Library Association (ALA), with the responsibility of preparing the proceedings of the ALA. Haines was then appointed to the ALA Council, and there she worked with both Cutter and with Melville Dewey. In 1906, Haines was elected second vice president of ALA, however, a bout of tuberculosis left Haines unable to continue at Bowker or ALA, and she resigned both positions.² At her resignation, Haines was awarded a yearly pension from Andrew Carnegie, in recognition of her "effective personal work done in the library field."³

Following a period of recuperation, Haines moved to Southern California, where she had a sister who was working at the State Library of California.⁴ During her recovery, Haines

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read widely, laying the foundation for much of her later work. By 1910, she was sufficiently recovered to begin work as a book reviewer for the *Pasadena News*. In 1914, Haines began to teach at the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), offering training classes on book selection and other related topics. Between 1914 and 1931, Haines taught courses for LAPL, the School of Librarianship of the University of California, and the School of Library Service of Columbia University.⁵

Haines's wide reading and work in collection development culminated in the 1935 publication of *Living With Books: The Art of Book Selection*, which became a standard text in library schools across the country. Many librarians welcomed Haines's work for its focus on the literary aspects of librarianship and focus on the reader—two areas that were being challenged by the rising interest in information systems and new technological developments.

In the 1930s, Haines expanded her work on book selection to include a vigorous opposition to censorship of books in libraries and schools. In 1940, Haines was instrumental in the establishment of the California Library Association's intellectual freedom committee, and served as the committee's first chair.⁶ Haines's strong advocacy of intellectual freedom and her openness to works considered by some to be controversial led to accusations of Haines being pro-Communist. When the revised edition of *Living With Books* (1950) included books discussing the USSR, Haines was "attacked in the January 1952 *Freeman* for alleged strong pro-Soviet bias."⁷ Sadly, fear of being tarred as a "fellow traveler" meant that Haines found few defenders, and she spent the last decade of her life in retirement.

So, what does Helen Haines have to offer readers' advisors in the twenty-first century? I would argue that there are a number of aspects of Haines's work that prepared a fertile ground for the renaissance of RA in the 1980s. These include a commitment to books, reading, and readers; an understanding of the importance of story in the lives of readers; an appreciation for the importance of human contact between the librarian and the reader; a grasp of the connection between RA service and collection development; an interest in an ongoing development of professional skills among librarians; a strong understanding of professional ethics as they relate to daily practice; and a passion for intellectual freedom and the freedom to read.

Haines was an advocate for broad reading. In her 1924 article "Modern Fiction and the Public Library," Haines notes that "librarians seldom contemplate modern fiction with serenity."⁸ During the 1920s, the inclusion of fiction in public libraries was raising both eyebrows and calls for censorship, even from some librarians. Haines, however, encouraged librarians to "display more confidence in and enthusiasm for books, a wider personal acquaintance with and sympathy for literature. [Building collections] for readers of various tastes."⁹ While Haines encourages librarians to look for the best in literature, she also reminds us not to scant new styles and trends. As more and more authors experiment with graphic novels, metafiction, cross-genre pollination, and the like, we

do well to heed Haines's admonition that "selection should be representative of types and tendencies in fiction—new methods in style, new experiments in themes and treatment."¹⁰ Without an openness to all types of writing it will be impossible for a readers' advisor to successfully work with the wide variety of readers with whom they come in contact. Haines was particularly an advocate of reading fiction in translation. Reading novels written in other countries, she wrote, allows the reader to "realize the kinship of the human family and see our own emotions and experiences repeated or interpreted in the emotions and experience of others."¹¹ An openness to all sorts of writing both builds a stronger readers' advisor as well as a stronger community.

Unlike many of her colleagues, Haines also understood that it is readers' reactions to the book that are central to the reading experience. While Haines was clear that some books are better written than others, she also understood that selection of materials for libraries is based not only on the interests of the community but on "the reading tastes, capacities, needs, and habits of the individuals who form the public."¹² As readers' advisors we must constantly assert the importance of listening to our readers. They are the ones who know what they are looking for, whether they can verbalize it or not. If we ignore the reading tastes of our users, whether in collection building or in offering one-on-one service we are doing them and ourselves a disservice. In *Living With Books*, Haines outlines five tests to use when judging the "values of individual novels."¹³ When looking at the test of the effect on the reader, Haines points out that this test "must be applied with understanding of the point of view of the reader to whom the book does appeal."¹⁴ While the librarian or readers' advisor certainly has, and should have, an opinion about the quality of the book in question, it is the reader's opinion of the book that is most central to the encounter. We need to remember to listen to the reader as well as making our own value judgment about particular books.

Not only an advocate for readers, Haines also was a passionate proponent of the connection between books and the library. In the twenty-first century, when we hear almost daily reports about the demise of print (and the demise of the library), it can be reinvigorating to read Haines's defense of the book and of the role of books in our lives. "Librarians need to realize more keenly the part that books must play in meeting the crucial problems of our immediate day."¹⁵ Haines was keenly aware of the importance of story in the lives of the community. The above quote comes from an article written in 1945, just after the end of World War II. As six years of violence and terror were coming to a close, Haines reminded librarians, and reminds us today, of the power of books to "enlighten prejudices, to enlarge understanding of vital issues, to strengthen public acceptance and practice of cooperation and race tolerance."¹⁶ There is no question that Haines felt that fiction reading was a crucial piece of this process. In 1928, she wrote that fiction is "the dominant creative literary art of our own day . . . drawn upon for copious transfusions of its lifeblood to vitalize anemic offspring of biography and

history.”¹⁷ Haines recognized that it is through story that both individuals and communities pass on their values and discover “the better angels of our nature.” The role of the library and of readers’ advisors in this discovery should be clear to all. However, as technology and its attendant gadgets proceed at a rapid pace, it is sometimes easy to forget that story is a major brand of the library. When so many of our users think of the library as a place to find materials to read, view, or listen to, we should be strengthening the services that relate to working with these users rather than trying to change their perceptions of the library. RA service, both synchronous and asynchronous, reinforces the library’s role as a willing and able source of reading guidance and creates a sustainable connection between library staff and the library’s readers.

In an increasingly virtual world, Haines’s writing also serves to remind us that the library is a rare point of human contact for many of our users. Unlike so many businesses and institutions today, libraries still offer our users the opportunity to talk to a person and receive direct assistance (in person, on the phone, or even through online technology). While technology is an essential part of contemporary library services, we have to be careful not to be so bedazzled by the lure of the next technological tool or service that we forget that we are working with people. In her article “Technics or Humanization in Librarianship,” Haines argues for the inclusion of the human element in book selection. She warns that strict adherence to “technics,” what Haines describes as the “scientific-mathematical mechanization of library functions,” will result in libraries that are “impervious to universals of human experience and unaware of the richness and stimulus of creative art.”¹⁸ As readers’ advisors we bring to our practice the passion for reading and the broad understanding of literature that allow us to make connections between a reader’s current interests and possible future interests. Great strides are being made in RA technology. However, regardless of the quality of its algorithms and the depth of its data, a computer cannot make the same connections that a librarian can. The personal interaction between a reader and a librarian is one of the strongest arguments for the value of RA service in libraries today.

Haines also clearly saw the connection between collection development and RA work. Too often today, selection of materials in libraries is separated from the public service work. Unless there is thoughtful and considered consultation between the selectors and readers’ advisors it is difficult to shape library collections to the needs and interests of the community of readers. In the first chapter of *Living With Books*, Haines discusses how important it is for book selectors to have an understanding of their community. She notes that rural, urban, and suburban communities all have “channels of interest” that are unique, and that the selector needs to have “knowledge of the activities, interests, organizations, institutions, and distinctive characteristics of community life” to understand these channels.¹⁹ In making selection decisions, Haines does not underestimate the value of those works that offer readers “mental escape and refreshment.”²⁰

Crime novels, historical fiction, adventure novels, and fantasy are all cited as rich stores of enjoyable reading. Haines was not completely free of prejudices herself, noting that crime fiction has value, but that this value differs from “the ‘active good’ of deepened understanding of human problems found in [literary fiction].”²¹ I like to think that were Helen Haines able to read the stories of Maj Sjöwall, Per Wahlöö, or other thoughtful mystery novelists, that she would revise her somewhat limited view of crime fiction’s ability to illuminate human problems. Nonetheless, it is important for us as readers’ advisors to remember that neither we nor those responsible for book selection in our libraries can operate independently, and that cooperation between these two services is essential for the success of each.

Throughout her career, Haines was an advocate of professional development. Much of her writing, especially *Living With Books*, sought to improve the skills of librarians. Haines, as noted above, also taught classes for a variety of library schools. As librarians, we have a professional commitment to developing and expanding our skills. As readers’ advisors, we should seek to develop our knowledge of books and reading. The more readers’ advisors we have, as Haines notes, “with enthusiasm for good reading, with range, flexibility, and discrimination in their own book knowledge—the richer and more vital will be the Public Library’s service to American life.”²² For Haines, this development of book knowledge was an ethical commitment. She notes that self-development is a quality of “foremost ethical importance.”²³ In our day to day work, we often think of ethical issues as being focused on topics of censorship or intellectual freedom. Haines reminds us that working the public desk without the necessary skills—a “warmer, more responsive, interest in people; deeper, more vital and broader, personal knowledge of books”²⁴—is a failure to live up to our professional standards. Haines also reminds us that we have a professional obligation to look for the best materials that we can. This does not mean that we ignore readers’ interests and suggest titles that we think that they ought to be reading. It does mean, though, that when we make suggestions to readers that we should be looking for the best examples in the particular genre or reading interest of that reader. If we are going to claim the mantle of professionalism, we need to be willing to exercise our judgment at the same time evincing a clear understanding of and sympathy for the reader’s needs and interests. Haines also warns us against being swayed by marketing: “There is always also a formidable volume of demand, created by commercial marketing, that centers upon novels (whatever their individual qualities may be) that are receiving the most intensive promotion at the moment.”²⁵ It is an important reminder in the days of author conglomerates putting out nine titles in a single year that we need to balance public demand with quality, trying to offer readers the best materials we can.

Finally, Haines reminds us that readers’ advisory has a stake in intellectual freedom issues, and that as RA we must always be advocates for the freedom to read. She notes that “the apologetic attitude, so commonly maintained, toward

the existence and reading of novels in public libraries is one of the vestigial remains of traditional moralism.”²⁶ If, as is often stated, the first tenet of readers’ advisory work is “never apologize for your reading tastes,”²⁷ then we also should never allow censors to dictate what is appropriate for others to read. Haines recommends that “for the best advantage of its community, [the library] must select from the mass of current fiction . . . by the practical standards of usefulness, or timeliness, or popular demand.”²⁸ Decisions that we make as readers’ advisors about what materials to acquire, how to present those materials to the public on our shelves and in our catalogs, what sort of booklists and displays to offer to our readers, and what title and author suggestions we make all need to be informed with a sense of openness to the broad range of possibilities and the broad reading interests of our communities. In our daily practice, we should reflect on how we can best serve the needs of the vocal majority of our readers as well as the needs of those whose needs are less clearly or loudly expressed. We must strive to be selectors and not censors in all of the work that we do with readers.

Anniversaries offer us the opportunity to reflect on past practice and on our future. Readers’ advisors are fortunate to have a vibrant and thriving field in which to practice. The seeds that we have been planting for the past twenty-five or so years are flourishing in the fertile ground that Helen Haines, and others, prepared for us. As we move on to our next quarter century, we should take the time to remember those luminaries whose work informs our practice.

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