Rethinking the Book

New Theories for Readers' Advisory

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As we near the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, interest in the practice of readers' advisory (RA) continues to be strong, as evidenced by the range of RA programs offered at conferences, resources created in both print and electronic formats, and the expanding number of readers' advisors. As the value of readers' advisory is increasingly accepted across the library community, practitioners are looking at new directions to take RA services. Here, David Beard and Kate Vo Thi-Beard examine the possibilities that a stronger understanding of reading theory offer for readers' advisors. The authors call for a closer tie between research into reading behavior and the practice of readers' advisory in the library. David Beard is Assistant Professor of Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota–Duluth, where he researches interdisciplinary approaches to rhetoric and literacy. Kate Vo Thi-Beard is a doctoral student in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her areas of interest include visual and popular media (including graphic novels and magazines), multiculturalism, and LIS education.—*Editor*

Readers' Advisory is experiencing a renaissance in library practice and critical reflection. As a result, we better understand the tools of readers' advisory (RA), the uses of those tools (especially online tools), and the pressures that falling budgets and increasingly varied library collections place upon traditional RA work.

But there is a limitation inherent in RA derived from its emphasis on the the book rather than the practice of reading. The bulk of literature on RA and the bulk of its tools focus on the book as an object. There is a strange faith that, if we find better ways to describe the object, we can more easily connect the object to patron. Such efforts are important; being able to describe a novel in terms of its genre, setting, characters, and plots is an important first step in RA. But research in literacy challenges the idea that readers select a book based on its features.

A simple example of current practice makes clear our position. If a young person liked Harry Potter, give them a book with a wizard; it has the same features, after all. If you enjoy the Anita Blake vampire stories, try Anne Rice—her books have vampires, too. Why do we presume that this approach makes for effective RA?

This essay makes three moves. First, it makes clear the state of the art in RA practice and RA tools. Then, it places that practice and those tools in productive tension with the current research in reading behavior. Finding that the current models

for RA are out of step with research on why people read, we can then probe the question, what would RA look like if it were inflected by current research in literacy practices?

DEFINING READERS' ADVISORY

RA is akin to reference because it's an interaction between patron and library staff with the general aim to connect the patron to resources—whether fictional, informational, or both. (Jessica Moyer talks about "the theory of 'incidental information acquisition.'"[1] For instance, by reading a contemporary romance novel set in Italy, readers may feel that they learn about the country's features.) RA is an organic extension of the array of reference services already offered in the library.

Maybe equally important for the library as a social institution, RA establishes a connection between patron and library. According to the RA Committee of the Reference and User Services Association's Collection Development and Evaluation Section,

> at its core, the reader/librarian interaction is a discussion about books. . . . The goal of the readers' advisory transaction is to make the reader feel that the library is a welcoming place to come and talk about the stories that are important to them.[2]

The RA interaction is what distinguishes a library from a stack of books at the checkout lane at the grocery story.

The most daunting aspects of RA are questions about genre fiction. While a librarian may have a familiarity with popular fiction, no librarian could be equally capable in romance, science fiction, westerns, fantasies, legal thrillers, and all their subdivisions.[3] That interaction is shaped by the tools. As we shall see, the tools for RA articulate the features of fictional works, including genre fiction.

TOOLS FOR READERS' ADVISORY

A number of tools support RA. In this article, it is only important to identify the ways that these resources focus on the object. They treat the secret of RA as if it merely required a better vocabulary to characterize the book. To see this bias, we need only see the central tools in most public libraries.

- The *Genreflecting* guides describe books in terms of genres, genre authors, titles, and themes and types, including historical, westerns, crime, adventure, romance, science fiction, fantasy, and horror.
- *Now Read This* discusses 1,000 mainstream novels in the usual terms of setting, story, characters, and language with subject heading recommendations.
- Saricks' *Readers Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* defines the genre and anatomizes its characteristics and "appeal elements." Saricks' *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* includes a chapter on "Articulating a Book's Appeal." Sarick describes books through dichotomies like "is there more dialogue or more description?" and "do characters act or react to events?"
- *What Do I Read Next? A Reader's Guide to Current Genre Fiction* again schematizes the features of genres: mystery, romance, western, fantasy, horror, science fiction, historical, inspirational, and popular fiction.

These tools are important, to be sure; they are the basic knowledge necessary for the new librarian unfamiliar with the genres. But the emphasis on the description of the book is a weakness in the current model of readers' advisory.

FAILURES OF THE CURRENT MODEL OF READERS' ADVISORY

Describing books in these terms has been controversial. Barry Trott has claimed that dividing books by genres can appear capricious.

> Is Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* a work of science fiction? After all, its most prominent plot feature is time travel. Should it be classified as romance? This is certainly how many reader reviews on Amazon.com described the book. Or is the book literary fiction, telling a story of family and relationships in lyrical and elegant prose? Logically, this book could be placed in any one of these genres.[4]

Division by genres is not easy and may inhibit the process of connecting readers to books.

And there is no guarantee that genre precision really helps connect the readers to the book they need. Alicia Ahlvers offers an example of a patron whose name for a genre was not the same as Ahlvers's professional terminology. As a result, a major disconnect appears. "One customer routinely asked for paperback romance set in the South or West. After working with her for a while, it became clear that what she really wanted was Westerns."[5] One interpretation of this disconnect places the burden on the reader—this reader didn't know what she was asking for. But it seems clear to us that a rethinking of the RA interaction—placing the burden for successful RA back on the shoulders of the professional—is essential.

CORRECTING THE RA INTERACTION

Instead of focusing on *what* people read, we need to focus on *why* they read. According to Moyer, Usherwood and Toyne found that some of the main reasons respondents cited for reading imaginative literature were

- escapism, which they found to be the most conscious perception of their need to read;
- relaxation, for example, to relax as part of a relaxing time (vacation);
- reading for instruction, as readers describe imaginative literature contributing to their learning and practical knowledge;

- literacy skills;
- insight into other ways of life, other individuals; and
- reading as essential "food" for the imagination.

According to Moyer, "reading was a critical part of readers' lives; no longer being able to read would be a crisis because reading is an important part of identity."[6] This schema is a first step toward understanding RA not in terms of the features of the books, but instead in terms of the activities of the reader.

Moyer also draws upon the research of Ross, who "found that reading was such a part of respondents' lives that they could and would read anywhere from the kitchen to the bus to the bathroom and elsewhere."[7] Moyer's work raises questions. Does it matter whether a reader reads for instruction or for imagination? Does it matter whether they read on the bus or in the bathroom? And do those conditions shape RA? We believe that the answer is yes.

Insufficient attention has been paid to the research on why people read, what practices they enact as part of reading activity, and what effects reading has on the construction of identity. The last portion of this essay summarizes this research with an eye toward practical application in the RA interaction.

REDEFINING READING AND ACTION

According to literacy theorist James Paul Gee, reading (as one of a range of literacy practices) has two primary functions through which it is best studied and analyzed. We would state these functions as follows:

- to scaffold the performance of action in the world, including social activities and interactions;
- to scaffold human affiliation in cultures and social groups and institutions through creating and enticing others to take certain perspectives on experience.[8]

There are many ways to interpret "action" in Gee's first principle. Of course, it includes practical, physical actions, like checking out a book about home repair or computer use. But it also includes social actions. Book groups are a clear example of a social action. Reading the novel selected by a book group enables membership in the group and participation in the discussion of the book. (And, of course, many book groups include discussion of other areas of human experience, from family to work, as part of that conversation.)

Action can also be a mental process. Schell writes about literate activities as a "coping mechanism" for an Appalachian woman named Pearl. For Pearl, reading is "a counterweight to the immediate pressures of her everyday life"—an activity that, during the depression, required a ten mile walk(!).[9]

When Ross and Chelton talk about "vegging out," we get closer to understanding what Usherwood and Toyne mean by escape—avoiding stress. [10] Here is where Janice Radway's classic work on the readership of romance novels becomes so very important. In fact, reading romance novels constitutes a very specific kind of action in the middle of the typical Harlequin romance reader's day.

Radway tells us that the act of escape is not entirely an imaginative act of escape. Usherwood and Toyne stress the idea of escaping into a fanciful or imaginative world. This is an understanding of fiction and literature as a kind of mental prophylactic; if we can spend some time daydreaming through reading, we can emerge better capable to deal with our lives. Radway talks about the romance reader as experiencing "the somewhat vague but nonetheless intense sense of relief they experience by identifying with a heroine whose life does not resemble their own in certain crucial aspects."[11] This reading experience may be common to many readers.

But women, in Radway's research, also experience a second, more visceral, sense of escape. For them, reading is, beyond its imaginative action, also an immediate and physical action. Radway reminds us that the act of reading demarcates a specific time and space for the reader. For the wife and mother who is always "on call" for the needs of her husband and children, reading is a very actual escape. Radway interviews a woman who claims that "when she reads her body is in the room but she herself is not."[12] The time spent reading is time away from the crying children and the husband demanding dinner; "what reading takes [women] away from, they believe, is the psychologically demanding and emotionally draining task of attending to the physical and affective needs of their families."[13] Indeed, Radway reports that the women define their reading time as their time, time not to be interrupted, and that children and husbands (sometimes grudgingly) honor that demarcation. In a real sense, then, reading is an action for these women, and an effective readers' advisory should account for the conditions and contexts of reading as an action.

REDEFINING READING AND IDENTITY

When Gee calls reading essential to "scaffold human affiliation in cultures and social groups and institutions," he is reminding us that reading is also integral to identity.[14] Identity is defined as our sense of place within relationships, social groups, and institutions as well as larger ideological structures. Viewed in this way, reading a book is no mere act of consumption. It is a constitutive act, bound to other acts like writing, conversation, dress, travel, art, labor, and other acts that constitute the self. We need to recognize that readers select texts that cultivate their identities: their places in various social institutions and in various ideological formations.

Readers coalesce around a number of group identities. Eileen E. Schell, writing about *Rural Literacies,* talks about a library patron who requests that her name be whited out from the checkout slip on a specific library book because "public awareness of her reading preferences [are] a way to signal her religious and moral stature in the community."[15] Every act related to literacy practice can carry meaning for group identity.

Identities can range from the innocuous identity as a member of a bookstore reading group to the vibrant identity

as a member of what scholars in media studies, American Studies, and sociology have identified as "fan culture." For example, Matthew Pustz discusses how "being a comic book fan is central to fans' identity."[16] Similarly, *Star Trek* fandom (which includes consumption of both books and media texts) entails the development of a powerful social identity: "Many fans characterize their entry into fandom in terms of a movement from . . . social and cultural isolation . . . toward more and more active participation in a 'community.'"[17] This is a group level of reader identity formation.

There are, for RA purposes, two levels of identification as a fan of a genre or sub-genre. Some fans come to define their fan identity only in terms of consumption: read books and magazines or consuming related media. At the second "level" of fandom, fans organize conventions, wear costumes, write letters, or publish fan magazines and blogs. Understanding the literate practices of both levels of fandom is valuable for RA.

Readers and Ideological or Cultural Formations

Finally, readership constructs a place in an ideological system. According to Radway, while women are "escaping" from the traditional role of housewife in reading a novel, those novels validate traditional heterosexual relationships, with all their gender inequities. In the end, the boy gets the girl, and the girl finds satisfaction in that relationship. Radway hints that romance fiction might "be an active agent in the maintenance of the ideological status quo because it ultimately reconciles women to patriarchal society and reintegrates them within its institutions."[18] There is no tickbox for "reinforces patriarchal ideology" in any RA tool, though it is clear that nearly any book within any genre can be interpreted as reinforcing or destabilizing one ideology or another. Assessing a reader's tastes in these terms requires a complex understanding of the reader.

Rethinking Readers' Advisory

What does this mean for RA? Must we investigate the reader's group affiliations, the schedules by which they read and the floorplan of their homes to provide adequate RA service? There is a risk in presuming that, since current research in reading requires thick description of reader behavior and ethnographic attention to detail, we should be equally detailed in our assessment of individual readers in an RA situation. Time and staffing restraints make this impossible.

But it does give us at least two opportunities to rethink the strategies we use to connect books to readers. We need to move beyond "chick lit" and "recent sci-fi" as categories for book display. We might consider pulling together books that stretch across genres.

- Pull the Jeff Gordon biographies together with the Harlequin NASCAR romances on an endcap; pulling together those texts might foster relationships between genders in those households that shut down around the television on racing day.
- What if the endcap of the science fiction section displayed books on blogging, with a sign about taking your fandom to the next level? Endcaps can connect readers of a certain genre to other literacy practices.
- Western novels can be matched with travel books or even cookbooks to encourage readers to plan a vacation or cook a southwestern dinner.
- Historical fiction can be placed alongside nonfiction works related to events in the novels, fostering and expanding upon incidental information acquisition.

In other words, if Stover, Trott, and Novak are right, and displays are a key aspect of conducting RA in a time-crunched library context, let's use the idea that reading enables action and fosters social affiliation to pull books together on the endcap.

Finally, for the person-to-person RA consultation, we should consider adding questions like the following:

- Tell me when and where you tend to read?
- Do you participate in book groups? If so what kinds?
- Do you have friends or family who share this reading interest?

Librarians can use these questions to expand their understanding of readers' affiliations, interactions, and social activities leading to effective RA suggestions. The answer to

the first question helps the librarian separate books to be digested in a twenty minute bus ride from books read curled up on a Saturday morning. Knowledge of participation in book groups lets the librarian recommend novels that perhaps are controversial to create lively discussion among members, and so on.

Hardest of all is developing the follow-up questions in a RA interview. When someone who is interested in the latest sci-fi comes in, we should be prepared to ask about local conventions or fan clubs. We should be prepared to connect their reading to their other literate and social activities.

This essay outlines only the beginning steps of rethinking RA. More work has yet to be done to integrate contemporary research on literacy with contemporary readers' services.

References and Notes

1. Jessica P. Moyer, "Adult Fiction Reading: A Literature Review of Readers' Advisory Services, Adult Fiction Librarianship, and Fiction Readers," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 224.
2. Collection Development and Evaluation Section, Readers' Advisory Committee, "Recommended Readers' Advisory Tools," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 294.
3. Vicki Novak writes that, typically, the genre fan knows more about the genre than the librarian does. And so, for most, simply directing the reader to the genre section of the library will suffice. This is a task that does not require a professional and cannot, in Novak's vision, be called "RA." She argues that "It does require a readers' advisor to make those connections between titles and across categories. The readers' advisor does not know best but can make connections that the reader had not thought of." See Barry Trott and Vicki Novak, "A House Divided?: Two Views on Genre Separation," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 35. In short, RA helps the reader break the genre barrier, moreso than negotiate the pocket universe that marks the genre.
4. Trott and Novak, "A House Divided?" 34.
5. Alicia Alvers, "Older Adults and Readers' Advisory," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 308–309.
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11. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1991), 90.
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17. Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York Univ. Pr., 2006), 41.
18. Radway, *Reading the Romance,* 217.