
Booktalking for Adult Audiences

More and more, librarians working with adult users are called on to talk to groups of readers about books and reading. Whether it is to a book discussion group seeking guidance in selecting new authors, a class on crime fiction, or a program through the library's outreach services to seniors, booktalking is no longer solely the responsibility of children's librarians. The ability to articulately and succinctly present a program on books is an essential skill for all readers' advisors. In the following piece, Jennifer Baker lays out some guidelines for librarians who are new to booktalking. She discusses choosing titles, preparing for the talk, and shaping the presentation to specific audiences. Baker is an adult services librarian in the fiction department at the Seattle Public Library and has worked as a readers' advisor and reference librarian. She is currently a member of the Reading List Council, a RUSA committee that awards "best of" in eight genres each year. An alumnus of the University of Washington (UW) graduate library program, she has conducted workshops on booktalking for students in the UW iSchool and has provided training for book group facilitators in UW's Common Book program. She is a NoveList contributor, reviews fiction for *Booklist* and was privileged to be mentored by Nancy Pearl.—*Editor*

Jennifer Baker, Guest Columnist

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to
Barry Trott, Adult Services Director,
Williamsburg Regional Library, 7770
Croaker Rd., Williamsburg, VA 23188;
e-mail: btrott@wrl.org.

Jennifer Baker is Adult Services
Librarian at the Seattle Public Library.

Most library literature on the subject of booktalking is aimed at youth services librarians; naturally these librarians have a great deal of influence in the classroom talking to kids about books. Since youth services professionals are frequently asked to booktalk, it stands to reason that the library graduate programs provide guidance and opportunity to do booktalks and receive peer feedback. Adult services librarians are less frequently required to do formal adult booktalks—this area of public programming is largely neglected and should be included as an important element of readers' advisory services. Marin Younker states that "questioning the value of booktalking to teens is like suggesting that it's a waste of time to offer storytimes to kids."¹ Story-rich programs and booktalks for adults provide the same kind of entertainment, mental stretching, and learning experience for adults, yet library literature and educational opportunities for adult services librarians-in-training is limited to nonexistent. Many adult services librarians never do a formal booktalk; most booktalking occurs in the stacks with individual patrons or online while suggesting appropriate titles on a specific topic. For the adult librarian invited to present a formal book talk in the community, the prospect can be daunting. This article provides a few practical pointers for readers' advisors to ensure booktalking success in different settings and with a

range of audiences. Some elements of booktalking, such as program planning and marketing, and the physical preparations for a formal booktalk, are not addressed in this piece, but are adeptly covered in Chapple Langemack's *The Booktalker's Bible*.²

CHOOSING THE RIGHT BOOKS

When invited to give a formal booktalk, the first thing to ask is what the host expects: What kind of reading will interest the audience? A group often will contact the library with a request for a booktalk on a specific topic. The local art museum asked my library's fiction department to provide a booktalk presenting nonfiction and fiction about art. Such specificity of topic can be an issue if the booktalker knows little about art and has only a short time to prepare. It's helpful at the onset to glean as much information about your audience as you can: their common interests, what they might be expecting, and what kind of program they are hosting. It will quickly become obvious to you if you are not the right booktalker for them.

If your reading interests and background are congruent with the group and you accept their invitation, think about the books you have enjoyed recently and which would fit the parameters. Choose only books you have loved and have actually read. Talking about titles you disliked—or worse, you haven't even read—sets the stage for failure. Enthusiasm is the key to success, and how can you be enthusiastic when you don't like a book or know little about it? You can bet that someone in the audience will correct you if you get a fact wrong. They will also know if you don't like a book. Why bother bringing it? Read and love what you booktalk.

Knowing what the group wants you to talk about and comparing that with what you enjoy reading can be tricky—it's up to you to make what you've read match their interests as much as possible. Think about the books you normally choose. What commonly appeals most to you in a great read? Is it a complex and enthralling story, a great cast of well-developed characters, a historical or futuristic setting, or maybe just a style of writing that flows and entrances? Do you always read the same genre? Do you prefer fiction to nonfiction? Are you an avid graphic novel reader or an audiobook fan? Before you can choose the right booktalking titles, it's essential to know your own tastes—it helps you steer away from potential monotony of appeal. If you don't fully understand appeal characteristics, or “doorways,” as Nancy Pearl calls the characteristics that lead us into books we enjoy, take the time to read Joyce Saricks's *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, or any of a number of articles and books on readers' advisory in library literature.³ Having knowledge of appeal in literature will not only help you identify your own reading habits and areas of weakness, but also will help you talk to readers individually and make informed title suggestions in your daily work.

Knowing what you've read and why you like it, do you have a broad selection of titles to talk about? Can you think of

books you've enjoyed with a variety of appeals? Sometimes a book will contain more than one main appeal. It's important when booktalking to address your entire audience, not just the ones who love what you love! Since plot is the appeal I enjoy most, I loved *The Map of Love* by Ahdaf Soueif for its wonderful parallel storylines, but for the sake of my audience I may choose to emphasize the wonderful insight the book gives into the Egyptian culture through the characters of the two male protagonists. Alternately I might talk about the effect of listening to the audio version of Terry Pratchett's *Wee Free Men* because hearing wordplay is funnier and more immediate than reading it, even though the element that led me into this trilogy was the Discworld setting. Choosing a range of materials and appeals will keep your audience tracking—each person waiting to see if you will talk about “their” kind of book. (If you do not have a wide range of appeals, topics and media, make a personal reading plan and get reading!)

Put the titles you have chosen in some sort of order. For example, for a literary audience I have chosen to talk about these titles in this order because I can easily segue from one book to the next:

- *The Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean (easy for me to start with, Alzheimer's and memory, WWII)
- *A Thread of Grace* by Mary Doria Russell (WWII, upheaval, Jewish Diaspora, realism)
- *The Book of Lost Things* by John Connolly (WWII, grief, magic, folktales)
- *The Painted Drum* by Louise Erdrich (grief, magic, Native American culture)
- *A Sudden Country* by Karen Fisher (the West, Native Americans and white settlers, strong woman, landscape)
- *A Beautiful Place to Die* by Malla Nunn (politics, murder, foreign landscape)
- *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (politics, foreign setting, memoir)
- *Motherless Brooklyn* by Jonathan Lethem (murder, first person narrative, Tourette's syndrome)
- *Look Me in the Eye* by John Elder Robison (Asperger's syndrome, memoir, humor)
- *The Rabbi's Cat* by Joann Sfar (humor, being different, change, uplifting end)

This list contains all literary works, mostly fiction, but includes two memoirs, two murder mysteries, a western, some magical realism, and two graphic books. These books will keep me talking for about thirty minutes. Two to three minutes per book should be long enough to whet an audience's appetite without boring them.

Once you have several potential titles, imagine how you might tell a good friend about each book. You would probably gush a bit, maybe tailor your comments to your friend's taste, perhaps even mimic a voice or comment more on why you loved the book than on the story itself. Think about how you might use similar approaches with an audience. Pretend the audience is simpatico: they almost always are, once you

READERS' ADVISORY

relax and have fun. What is the appeal you want to emphasize, and what is the best presentation to capture a reader's attention and make them want to read the book? This simple exercise gives us clues about our own natural style when we talk about literature, the same style we should use in book-talking with readers.

Each book's mini-talk has consistent elements, though

SUGGESTED LITERARY TITLES FOR BOOKTALKING

Fiction and biography about the "lines in the sand" drawn at the Cairo Peace Conference of 1921

Dreamers of the Day by Mary Doria Russell
Queen of the Desert by Janet Wallach

Four outstanding titles about African Americans in U.S. history

Someone Knows My Name by Lawrence Hill
Song Yet Sung by James McBride
A Lesson before Dying by Ernest Gaines
Jefferson's Pillow by Roger Wilkins

Six novels of war and its effect on individual lives

A Thread of Grace by Mary Doria Russell
The Madonnas of Leningrad by Debra Dean
The Quiet American by Graham Greene
Rules for Old Men Waiting by Peter Pouncey
For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway
A Gesture Life by Chang Rae Lee

Two fascinating, unusual memoirs, and one novel that reads like memoir

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson
Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi
My Life as a Traitor by Sarah Ghahramani

Novels about Asian immigrants in America

Shanghai Girls by Lisa See
The Good Earth by Pearl Buck
When Broken Glass Floats by Chanrithy Him
When the Emperor Was Divine by Julie Otsuka

Coming-of-age stories

The Highest Tide by Jim Lynch
So Long, See You Tomorrow by William Maxwell

the elements may be presented in a different order. Knowing these elements helps you stay on track as you speak. You will always have a leading statement or introduction to the book, a few plot details, the hook, and a closing statement. The leading statement is only a few words to help segue into the book. For instance, to segue from *The Madonnas of Leningrad* to *A Thread of Grace*, one might simply say, "Another book set in World War II, but in a totally different area . . ." From *Motherless Brooklyn* to *Look Me in the Eye*, a good segue could be, "And if you want to know what it's like to have Asperger's Syndrome, read the real-life story . . ." It's good to memorize your first line so you always know where to start.

The second element when talking up a title is, of course, plot. To a certain extent, you have to say what the book is about. A good rule of thumb is to say as much about appeal as possible and as little about plot as you can get away with. Have you ever had someone tell you about a movie they loved and had them go on and on about every single detail—including the end? Readers don't need the whole story; they want to know why they will *like* the story. Tell just enough to make them curious, emphasizing why you loved it. The plot description could be as little as, "It's about what went right for the Jews in Italy during World War II" (*A Thread of Grace*). Or it can be a part of the book that moved you: "Faye is an estate agent and while cataloging the contents of a client's home, she comes across an antique drum painted in the Ojibwe tradition. It seems to call to her. So she steals it—something she has never done and cannot explain even to herself" (*The Painted Drum*).

The "hook," a term used by many youth services librarians, is a story delivery device: the action, prop or statement that best illustrates the book's main attraction and hooks the audience into wanting to read it. A hook for *The Book of Lost Things* might be, "What would happen if you visited a Grimm's fairy tale and it wasn't how you remembered it?" or, for *The Rabbi's Cat*, "The rabbi's cat wants a bar mitzvah so he can be a proper Jew." Perhaps for a book like *Wee Free Men*, you might use a Scottish accent to describe the "big wee hag" from the Feegles' perspective. You might decide to tell a particularly suspenseful part of the story and then leave the audience hanging, or wear a witch's hat to talk about *Wicked*. A word of caution, however: If you aren't good at drama and props, steer clear of them. You should be comfortable with your hooks and try to vary them from one book to the next. The audience will remember your hooks (good and bad), so make it audience- and appeal-appropriate, attention-grabbing, and something you can pull off gracefully. Memorize and practice delivering the hook.

Be sure you have a final statement prepared for each book. Having this memorized will prevent you all from saying inane things like, "This is such a wonderful book" after each title. You can mention the book's suitability for book group discussion, use a cliffhanger, simply restate the title and author, and move on to the next book or perhaps use a read-alike reference ("It's a cross between Raymond Chandler and Janet Evanovich").

WORKING WITH DIFFERENT ADULT AUDIENCES IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS

Most booktalking occurs in book group settings. Community book clubs invite local librarians to tell them about great reads for discussion. When they call, ask in-depth questions before accepting their invitation. Pertinent questions should include whether they want you to talk about many titles or do an in-depth review of one book, how long you should speak, and if a meal will be served (don't talk during a meal, especially with your mouth full). These small groups of literary readers can be daunting, so be sure you are prepared with plenty of titles (in case individuals have already read some) and the three main elements of each mini-booktalk firmly in mind (and in your notes).

Choose a range of titles with varying degrees of literary difficulty; don't assume they have highbrow tastes just because they read classics last year. Perhaps they're in the mood for something lighter. You could bring Faulkner's *A Light in August*, Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, and Franzen's *The Corrections* as more difficult titles. You might like to bring a few nonfiction titles like *The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court* by Jeffrey Toobin, *The Lost Painting* by Jonathan Harr, and a memoir like *Hope's Boy* by Andrew Bridge. You can find lighter discussable literary titles such as *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Shaffer or *Prayers for Sale* by Sandra Dallas. Be sure to tuck in two or three great reads to talk about, just for fun. Readers love to hear about books they might like to enjoy outside their book club.

Literary groups will be enthusiastic listeners who not only want ideas for great new reads, but who also love to talk about books. Expect them to interact with you as you speak, so be prepared to control the audience interaction. Move on if someone says "oh, we've read that," or if the group seems bored. Use humor and smile if you are derailed by your audience: "Do you want to hear about more books now, or shall I just set them out?"

For the general community adult audience—perhaps a booktalk hosted by your library—choose a very wide range of titles and formats. Bring graphic novels and audiobooks and large print editions when you can. Try to pick books most people won't be familiar with and make sure your library owns the titles you share. Bring some old favorites, some genre fiction, and a few new books that don't have long hold lists at the library. Remember to include multicultural titles and books of varying reading difficulty.

When talking to groups of seniors, it's especially important to discover exactly what is expected of you. Perhaps a book group actually wants you to lead a group discussion, not suggest new titles, or maybe they will want you to stay for lunch after your talk. Often, even in tiny meeting rooms, you will be holding a microphone and won't be able to manage notes and a book as well. A little foresight really helps. Remember to bring audiobooks and large-print editions. Also, be prepared for sleepers—sometimes those who can't hear well check out, and sometimes medications cause drowsiness.

It's probably not your fault if someone falls asleep! While most adult groups can manage a thirty- to forty-minute booktalk, with seniors twenty minutes is plenty. Many senior library users express frustration over certain types of books and tell

BOOKTALKING SUGGESTIONS FOR MIXED ADULT AUDIENCES

Magic, fantasy, and horror

The Book of Lost Things by John Connolly
The Magicians by Lev Grossman
Breathers: A Zombie's Lament by S.G. Browne
The Accord by Keith Brooke

Women's fiction, romance, and historical fiction

A Sudden Country by Karen Fisher
Prayers for Sale by Sandra Dallas
Sing Them Home by Stephanie Kallos
The Madonnas of Leningrad by Debra Dean
The Family Man by Elinor Lipman
The Temptation of the Night Jasmine by Lauren Willig

Mystery and suspense

Shatter by Michael Robotham
Below Zero by C.J. Box
Dog on It by Spencer Quinn
The Dark Horse by Craig Johnson

Fun coming-of-age stories about boys

The Highest Tide by Jim Lynch
The Whistling Season by Ivan Doig

Historical fiction

Grace Hammer by Sara Stockbridge
The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane by Katherine Howe
All Other Nights by Dara Horn
The Steel Wave by Jeff Shaara
The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society by Mary Ann Shaffer

Interesting nonfiction with wide appeal

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls
Not Becoming my Mother by Ruth Reichl
The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court by Jeffrey Toobin
The Rabbi's Cat by Joann Sfar

READERS' ADVISORY

us they “don't have time to waste” on books they know they won't like; they will say so in a booktalk setting, so don't be surprised. Luckily, while seniors are one of the hardest groups to reach, they will be most appreciative of your time and efforts.

Whenever you visit or host a group of adults, bring a list of all the books you talk about in the order you present them. Tell the audience you made the list and make sure everyone has one so they can take notes on all the great reads you suggest. When talking to book groups, include in your bibliography a few resources for later use such as online book club sites that suggest great new books and provide discussion questions (e.g., www.readinggroupguides.com) and perhaps a favorite book group guide such as Diana Loevy's *The Book Club Companion*.⁴

Many of these tips apply to the two other main types of booktalking you will be expected to do: the hand sell in the stacks and the dreaded job interview. A good readers' advisor hand sells books all day while roaming the library floor. The easiest way to do in-house readers' advisory is to scout out a few books you've read and enjoyed and either set them aside or maybe mark them as a “staff pick.” Think about why you enjoyed each one, and quickly practice finding the book's appeal and a related conversational hook. If you do this every work day, when your patrons ask for a good book you will know what's in and can whip out a one-minute booktalk. The more comfortable you are talking about books in every setting, the better your booktalks will be, so practice on patrons, friends, and bus buddies. When applying for a position at a public library branch or in a readers' advisory capacity, you will certainly be asked to tell the interview panel about a favorite book. Make sure you have one or two titles in mind and that you have practiced talking about them in front of the mirror so your face sends the right messages: “I loved this book and I want to tell you about it.”

Booktalking is not especially difficult or mentally taxing,

but it can be scary to stand in front of an audience and talk for thirty to forty minutes. Like any other aspect of our profession, booktalking is something we are expected to do. To do it well, even informally, a certain amount of self-discipline and practice is necessary. These are my rules for booktalkers:

- Read widely and talk about what you read to whoever will listen.
- Talk only about books you have read and enjoyed.
- Keep track of what you read.
- Develop your own style.
- Use your own words.
- Be enthusiastic.
- Use a hook based on appeal, don't tell the story.
- Never tell the end—ever.
- Quote from memory, don't read to the audience.
- Bring a list of the titles you talk about.
- Have fun.
- Say thank you!

References and Notes

1. J. Marin Younker, “Talking It Up,” *School Library Journal* 52, no. 4 (Apr. 2006): 39.
2. Chapple Langemack, *The Booktalker's Bible: How to Talk about the Books You Love to Any Audience* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).
3. Joyce Saricks, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: ALA, 2005). See also Ann-Marie Cyr and Kellie M. Gillespie, *Something to Talk About: Creative Booktalking for Adults* (Lanham, Md., Scarecrow, 2006); Kaite Mediatore Stover, “Stalking the Wild Appeal Factor: Readers' Advisory and Social Networking,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 243–46, 269; Joyce Saricks, “Keeping a List,” *Booklist* 105, no. 7 (Dec. 1, 2008): 23; and Neal Wyatt, “An RA Big Think,” *Library Journal* 132, no. 12 (July 1, 2007): 40–43.
4. Diana Loevy, *The Book Club Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience* (New York: Berkley Trade, 2006).