
Building on a Firm Foundation

Readers' Advisory over the Next Twenty-Five Years

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For the past quarter century, we have seen a revitalization of readers' advisory (RA) services in the public libraries in the United States. The 1980s saw three major events that re-established the value of working with readers: the publication of the first edition of *Genre-flecting* under the editorship of Betty Rosenberg (1982); the establishment of the Chicago-area Adult Reading Roundtable (ARRT) (1984); and the publication of the first edition of *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* by Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown (1989). Although not the only markers for the RA renaissance, each of these three events defined a crucial segment of RA practice. Rosenberg's book was the first RA tool that examined the intricacies of genre fiction. Many more books would follow this pattern. The establishment of ARRT brought like-minded readers' advisors together to talk about their work, both the theory and, particularly, the practice of connecting readers to books. The success of ARRT has generated a multitude of other reading-centered groups across the country, fostering a spirit of professional inquiry that has enabled readers' services to grow in scope and magnitude. Saricks and Brown developed and promulgated the concept of using appeal to make connections between authors and titles. The idea of appeal has been at the center of RA practice ever since and continues to be applied and shaped in new ways.

After twenty-five years it is, perhaps, a time to look at what the challenges might be for readers' advisors in the next quarter century. In his book *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Donald Schon notes that a reflective practitioner

allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. . . . When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context.¹

As we look toward the future of readers' advisory with the goal of becoming reflective practitioners, there are numerous areas that offer us both challenges and opportunities to expand our practice into new areas and to do so in a thoughtful way, responding to new opportunities by considering past practice and applying the lessons learned there to our future practice. Doing so will certainly assure us of the continued success of readers' advisory services.

The following pages describe some of the potential challenges and opportunities that exist for readers' advisors in all types of libraries. Some of the items discussed are already being addressed by librarians and libraries in various ways, others less so. In all cases the intent here is to offer these items as a stimulus to further conversation and debate among readers' advisors. For it is in this sort of professional discourse that new paths can be forged that will keep RA work vital. It is hoped that future entries in this column can examine some of these topics more deeply and make recommendations on directions for the profession. Readers who might be interested in taking on the challenge of writing about any of these topics are encouraged to contact the column editor.

FORMAT-BASED READERS' ADVISORY

The initial focus in the late-twentieth century readers' advisory renaissance was on fiction reading, and in particular on genre fiction. Next, readers' advisors began to look at ways to apply the concepts of appeal and the practices developed for working with fiction readers to working with readers of narrative nonfiction. In the past couple of years, RA practitioners have started to consider how to apply these same skills to working with audiobook listeners. In addition to the concerns of story, setting, mood, language, and character, audiobook advisory requires a knowledge and sensitivity to things such as the narrative voice, reading style, where the auditor plans to listen to the recording, and what sort of media format the auditor needs and desires. These new ways of thinking about audiobooks also can apply to working with users interested in help finding music and films. Advisory for films and music will require advisors to take their current knowledge and apply it in new ways, but will also require a reshaping of practice as well. Some questions that could be considered in film and music advisory: How well do the concepts of appeal apply in an aural (but not narrative) or visual world? Does the shorter time investment in a film or music CD mean that the patron has less interest in getting assistance in locating similar works? What sort of tools would be useful for working with viewers and listeners, and do they already exist?

WHERE IS GENRE GOING?

One of the most challenging aspects of readers' advisory service is maintaining and building knowledge of genres. Readers' advisors have long used genre as a means of sorting out and defining a set of precepts that describe a certain style of writing. Knowledge of the appeals of these precepts both within and across genres allows advisors to make better suggestions when working with readers. While the fundamental genres—crime, romance, historical, western, fantasy, and science fiction—all are still important to both readers and to readers' advisors, the concept of genre is becoming increasingly complex. Writers such as Cormac McCarthy, Mary Doria Russell, Michael Chabon, Audrey Niffenegger, and many others have, as Chabon says, built their “literary house[s] on the

borderlands.”² These writers all use elements usually associated with genre fiction in what otherwise would be considered “literary fiction.” The success of titles such as Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* (which uses a very literary style to explore the consequences of time travel on a relationship) or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (with its postapocalyptic setting) have exposed many readers to elements of genres they would not necessarily have tried otherwise. As genre definitions become increasingly blurry, readers' advisors may be less able to rely on genre as a defining tool in the practice. At the same time, new genres or reading interests are continually developing. Think about the explosion of the “chick-lit” novels in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, or the huge reader interest in what is variously defined as “street-lit” or “urban fiction.” Keeping up with the interests of the reading community has never been more complex or more challenging, and it is likely to continue to be so. The need for good reviews of these materials and of other writing that explores Chabon's “borderlands” is essential to the ability of the advisor to develop an understanding of these areas and to make useful suggestions to readers. The readers' advisor of the future must have a willingness to venture into these less-known areas of the reading world and to come back not only alive but also with an appreciation for what readers in these areas enjoy.

RA FOR NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS

As many libraries across the country are finding, the demand for reading, listening, and viewing materials in languages other than English is growing rapidly. Sometimes this interest may reflect the needs of a single group in the community, but, especially in larger urban areas, there may be a variety of non-English speaking communities looking for materials in their libraries. The Queens Public Library in Flushing, New York, collects materials in over forty languages.³ At the Arlington (Va.) Public Library outside of Washington D.C., the adult collection includes materials in ten languages, including Vietnamese, Spanish, and Chinese.⁴ Increasing demand for foreign language materials places demands on library budgets and selectors, but the challenges raised here are equally important to readers' advisors. Here we have a segment of the community who are often avid library users, but in many cases we are not able to provide these readers with the same level of service that we can provide our other readers. An obvious challenge faced by advisors here is the ability to discuss the reader's interests in their own language. Tied to this is the difficulty of locating reviews and synopses of foreign language titles in order to be able to make recommendations. Pat Alter, adult collection development librarian at Arlington Public Library, notes that foreign language periodicals can be a good way to provide non-English readers with materials that meet their reading interests.⁵ Providing reading lists and other readers' advisory materials in languages other than English may be a way to serve this segment of the reading community. Libraries who are looking at

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offering readers' advisory services to non-English speaking readers must also consider whether these readers are more interested in original materials in their language of choice or in translations of materials originally in English into another language. Again, Alter notes that at Arlington Public Library most readers of non-English language materials are looking for original materials, not translations.

READERS' ADVISORY IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

In her article "Academic Libraries and Extracurricular Reading Promotion," Julie Elliott makes a persuasive case for the reintroduction of readers' advisory services to the academic library world.⁶ In her piece, Elliott notes the history of what she calls "extracurricular reading" in academic settings and the role that academic libraries once played in providing not only materials but guidance for student readers. As Elliott points out, there are many compelling reasons for academic librarians to embrace the role of readers' advisors for their reading community and to reverse the decline in support of extracurricular reading that began in the second half of the twentieth century. While many schools have incorporated some form of campus-wide reading program, there are many other opportunities for academic libraries to build a community of readers on campus. Opportunities also exist for academic libraries to partner with local public libraries in supporting extracurricular reading. The question of the future of reference service is a topic of much discussion in the academic library world, and many of the participants in this debate predict that reference service may be less and less important in the future. Readers' advisory services offer academic libraries the opportunity to expand their contact with readers in their university community and to attract new users into the library. Implementing or expanding support of extracurricular reading in academic libraries will face challenges in terms of budgeting for reading materials not related to courses and in terms of RA training for staff. But, as Elliott notes, "Probably the best reason to keep finding ways to promote recreational reading in the college library is to be able to witness those moments when the students connect with their reading."⁷

LIBRARY 2.0 AND RA

There has been a great deal of discussion in the library community about the concepts that are generally referred to as "Library 2.0" or "Web 2.0." These concepts center around the idea of user-focused service and using technology to create and develop user communities. This is what readers' advisory has always been about: first, listening to individual readers and making suggestions for them on the basis of their reading interests; and second, building a community of readers. Given that readers' advisors have been "2.0" for a long time, the challenge remains how best to incorporate new technologies into our current practice. Blogs and wikis offer advisors the

opportunity to reach out to users in new ways, and perhaps to reach a new set of users for whom visiting the physical library is not convenient or possible. There are many libraries currently experimenting with these technologies. Online book discussions and reading groups also have been developing.⁸ Libraries are looking at ways to make their catalogs more useful to readers by incorporating data from sites such as LibraryThing (www.librarything.com/forlibraries) or enabling users to comment and tag titles in the catalog. Some libraries have been experimenting with online, form-based readers' advisory services.⁹ All of these tools offer libraries the chance to improve the services to their reading community as well as the chance to expand that community. Challenges do exist here though. Advisors now have competition from services such as LibraryThing, Shelfari, GoodReads, and Literature Map that offer themselves as sources for readalikes. Readers' advisors also need to consider how best to blend the concepts of appeal, which have been developed over the past twenty years, with the idea of readers tagging books with their own headings. This idea of folksonomy as opposed to taxonomy offers readers' advisors ways to discover more about how readers describe their own reading interests, but at the same time presents a variety of challenges, particularly to the quality of tagging. One of the biggest challenges facing advisors in the Library 2.0 age will be maintaining the human touch that is so central to readers' advisory services.

DEFINING TERMS

As noted above, the concepts of appeal as applied by readers' advisors were developed by Saricks and Brown in the late 1980s. Over the past twenty years, these concepts have for the most part remained fairly constant. Recently though, as Neal Wyatt points out, "The concept of appeal is . . . being changed and adapted by those who helped to create it and by a new group of librarians eager to help develop new thinking about how patrons react to, and interact with, what they read."¹⁰ As librarians learn more about how readers respond to books through discussion and through analysis of reader tagging of titles and authors, readers' advisory practice needs to incorporate these new concepts into its vocabulary of appeal. The expansion of readers' advisory services in the area of narrative nonfiction also necessitates a re-examination of appeal to see how we can best translate these concepts from fiction to nonfiction writing. Although there has been discussion over the years of developing a controlled vocabulary of appeal, in the days of user tagging it may be more reasonable to look at how best to incorporate reader-developed concepts of what a book is into our discussion of appeal. As libraries develop their own book blogs and continue to write reviews for the public, and as librarians add tags to blogs or catalog records, an opportunity exists to help readers make better choices in terms of tagging vocabulary. The evolution of the elements of appeal will be essential to the ability of readers' advisors to provide the reading community with reading suggestions that are thoughtful and appropriate.

REACHING READERS

Although the past quarter century has seen great strides in the development of RA tools and in the codification of RA practice, the marketing of RA services still lags behind our practice. When asked, few librarians express the feeling that they get as many RA questions as they would like. Frequently, RA services, like ILL services, seem to be serving a small, though dedicated and thankful, portion of the library's reading community. Reference librarians have long lamented the challenge of working with users who "hate to bother you with my question." A similar problem exists in the readers' advisory world, where too often readers are reluctant to come to the librarian seeking reading suggestions. There are many reasons why this may be so, and some of them are beyond the direct control of the library. However, there are a variety of areas where libraries and readers' advisors could expand their reach into their reading communities. As libraries increasingly are moving away from static reference desks in favor of reaching users in the stacks, readers' advisors can take a similar approach and not simply wait for readers to come to the desk to ask for assistance. Technology allows readers' advisory to expand beyond the walls of the library in a variety of ways, but again the marketing of these services is crucial to their success. It is also essential that these tools be easy for readers to use. The more complicated it is to use library resources, the more likely that readers who are pressed for time are going to look for other resources to get the reading suggestions that they are seeking. In 1931, S. R. Ranganathan proposed his Five Laws of Library Science, the fourth of which was to "save the time of the reader."¹¹ As more and more readers feel time pressures that limit their ability to take advantage of traditional readers' advisory services, advisors need to explore new avenues for reaching these readers in order to maintain the library's role in the community of readers.

QUANTIFYING RA PRACTICE

While readers' advisory practice has and continues to develop in positive ways, there has been a lag in the development of ways to quantify what we are achieving as readers' advisors. In part, this is because the readers' advisory encounter is hard to measure. While a tick on a transaction log indicates that there has been an interaction between a reader and a librarian, there are many other aspects to the readers' advisory encounter that are not tracked. In order to make an argument for the value of RA services to the library and the community as library budgets continue to tighten, it will be important to look for more ways to quantify what readers' advisory brings to the library. Anecdotal evidence is fine, but it is not enough. Advisors should look for ways to assess the impact of their work on library circulation, for instance calculating what percentage of circulation of materials comes from book displays. Creating links from the library catalog to RA resources online will allow libraries to measure how often users access those resources from the catalog. In looking at developing

statistical measures for RA services, it is important to look at the entire range of service offered, not just the direct, one-on-one encounter between the reader and the advisor. Book displays, book discussion groups, author visits, outreach services, reading lists, book blogs, and all other means of connecting readers with materials should somehow be included in the measurement of RA services. Not only will this sort of data strengthen the position of RA services in the quest for support, it also creates for readers' advisors benchmark levels that allow them to assess the success or lack of success for particular programs.

Finally, the continued success of readers' advisory services depends on the continued cooperation between practitioners in the field and researchers and theorists in the academy. At times these groups have progressed on parallel courses that do not intersect, resulting in loss of opportunities for useful and fruitful collaboration. Bringing practitioners and theorists together to explore the response of readers, listeners, and viewers to their chosen materials and then applying that knowledge to the practice of readers' advisory will result in a more reflective practice, as described by Schon, and will ensure the continued success and expansion of readers' advisory services in the coming years.

References and Notes

1. Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983): 68.
2. Michael Chabon, *Maps and Legends* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2008): 67.
3. "Queens Library Facts," www.queenslibrary.org (accessed Aug. 21, 2008).
4. Pat Alter, personal communication to the author, Aug. 21, 2008.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Julie Elliott, "Academic Libraries and Extracurricular Reading Promotion," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 34–43.
7. *Ibid.*, 42.
8. See Barbara Fister, "'Reading as a Contact Sport': Online Books Groups and the Social Dimensions of Reading," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 303–309.
9. See Neil Hollands, "Improving the Model for Interactive Readers' Advisory Service," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 205–212.
10. Neal Wyatt, "An RA Big Think," *Library Journal* 132, no. 12 (July 1, 2007): 40.
11. S. R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (Madras, India: Madras Library Association, 1931), <http://dlist.sir.arizona.edu/1220/08/fivelawsch6.pdf> (accessed Aug. 22, 2008).