
All For One, One For All

Lucy M. Lockley, Guest Columnist

Lucy M. Lockley is Collection Development Manager, St. Charles City-County (MO) Library District

*Correspondence to this column should be addressed to **Laurel Tarulli**, Dalhousie University, School of Information Management, Halifax, Nova Scotia; email: laureltarulli@yahoo.com.*

When we attend library conferences we often rush back to our libraries excited to implement some of the ideas that we've heard. Lucy Lockley presented a session at the 2012 Public Library Association Conference that focused on a staff-wide, all-inclusive readers' advisory model. With an "all for one, one for all" mentality, we receive a vision for including all staff in readers' advisory services and strengthening a service that is growing in popularity within our libraries. For those of us unable to attend the conference or her session, I asked her if she would be willing to be a guest author so that she could share her ideas with all of us. Fortunately, Lockley agreed to write an article for this column that explores her ideas on a readers' advisory model as library-wide initiative and the success that can be achieved when all staff are included in book discussions and readers' advisory training.—*Editor*

Alexandre Dumas had the right idea with his motto for the Three Musketeers. Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and their young friend, d'Artagnan, worked as a team and supported one another, all while defending King and country. Library staff can also be "all for one, one for all" by working together to provide great customer service, which promotes the library and supports their community. A major component of customer service is readers' advisory and encouraging reading is what libraries are all about.

One way to build a group of library Musketeers is to have all staff trained in readers' advisory and encourage them to develop their reading interests. Libraries have found that a readers' advisory query can come not only in many forms, but also can be asked of any and all members of the staff. Therefore it shouldn't matter whether a staff member is helping an individual find a copy of the current bestseller or assisting someone in understanding how to download an e-book. Nor should it matter if staff are talking about authors and titles while participating in a book discussion or if they are engaging a customer in a quick conversation about reading during the checkout process. The best way for libraries to continue providing good service to their users is for all staff to receive training in readers' advisory.

Customers do not always wait to ask for reading assistance at a service desk. Some library users seem to be afraid to come to the desk, and seek out staff in a more comfortable or personal setting before asking for help. Reading is, after all, a personal matter that is specific to the individual. What appeals to one reader does not necessarily appeal to another. Libraries have found that a staff member who is shelving in the stacks is just as likely to be asked about readers' advisory as someone working the reference or checkout desks. Therefore

it would be useful if every member of the library staff was able to offer at least one title suggestion from every popular genre, know of a coworker who reads the same author, be familiar enough to point out a display containing titles of possible interest, or mention that the library has electronic readers' advisory resources that may be able to help. These are all basic tenets of readers' advisory and good customer-service practices.

One of the best ways to develop reading interests is to talk about those interests and engage others in talking about books. Book discussions are not only fun but can be empowering and inspire creativity. Discussions, especially book discussions, involve more than one person and can act as a catalyst for ideas. They also can help to improve teamwork, often present new areas of interest, and encourage understanding.

Some library systems have developed genre study programs open to all members of the staff to ensure that their employees can provide readers' advisory services. Such programs often use a book discussion format or a combination of book discussion and book talk meetings to cover multiple genres and nonfiction topics. Many include occasional training sessions to introduce staff to various readers' advisory tools and techniques. These arrangements expand knowledge of genres and nonfiction topics, promote reading outside of established comfort zones, and introduce new ways of providing readers' advisory service.

Often, genre study programs use a condensed version of the "five-book challenge." This challenge is issued in *The Romance Readers' Advisory: The Librarian's Guide to Love in the Stacks* by Ann Bouricius.¹ She recommends reading five books each year from a new genre to learn more about and keep up with developments in a genre. In addition, the monthly meeting arrangement common among many book discussion clubs can be adapted by library staff for studying any genre or topic. If the decision is made to use a simple book discussion model, a meeting could be held each month to discuss a different title from among the subgenres of a main genre topic. This arrangement allows participants to explore the many aspects of a genre or topic in more depth, depending on the number of meetings. The Adult Reading Round Table (ARRT) in Illinois has been using this type of formula for more than fifteen years. They spend two years covering a single genre in detail, with discussion meetings held every other month.²

A combination model uses the first meeting as a book discussion where all participants have read the same title, a benchmark representative of the genre or topic being covered. The next meeting will be a book talk session where each member gives a brief talk about another title representative of a subgenre or other nonfiction topic related to the benchmark. Using this arrangement, each participant will read two titles from a specific area and learn about others by hearing the book talks. St. Charles City-County Library District in Missouri has been using this model for more than ten years and is currently in Round Four of a continuous staff training program (<http://bit.ly/NITcAR>).³

A genre study group leader should encourage each

member to continue developing their readers' advisory skills by thinking about and discussing how a title is (or isn't) a good representative of the genre being studied. Participants name the appeal factors of a book, explain how they would briefly describe the plot to someone else, suggest possible read-alike titles, and define what type of reader might be interested in the book. These genre-specific questions should be in addition to title-specific questions, which are, of course, the core of any book discussion, even one designed as a staff training program. Most group leaders would probably agree that the best book discussions are those with opposing viewpoints. But even if all participants agree about the title, the act of discussing books, authors, writing styles, genres, and appeal factors offers a rich learning experience for staff, continues to encourage teamwork, and enhances readers' advisory skills. The act of discussing employs the "all for one, one for all" motto and can help to build a team of library Musketeers.

Coverage of multiple genres and nonfiction topics offers members the opportunity to broaden their personal reading experience. Librarians are aware that many individuals, including themselves and coworkers, tend to only read books in specific genres and never venture into other reading territory. Participation in a multiple-genre training program would, in essence, "force" staff to read outside their own personal comfort zones. This also could be a factor for inducing individuals to join the program—the learning process may be considered more enjoyable because of the so-called "required" reading. Participants will be introduced to new authors, titles, genres, and subjects that they probably would have never considered before.

Staff will learn about the differences between genres and, more importantly, learn why customers enjoy reading "those" types of books as they are introduced to new reading territory. Staff should be aware that a fan of science fiction is no different from someone who reads the classics or an individual who reads steamy romances. All are library customers who may be in need of assistance in finding the next good book to read! Developing an understanding of the variety of readers who come into the library should engender an appreciation that no one, not even themselves, need ever be embarrassed by what they read.⁴ Encouraging such an open attitude will make library staff better advisors when working with those seeking reading assistance; therefore it will help them provide better service to customers.

Genre study programs, which also provide training in the use of readers' advisory tools or introductions to different techniques, can further enhance the abilities of staff. Showing what print tools are available on the shelves in a library collection or how to use any readers' advisory databases that the library has should not only improve skills but engender confidence in a staff member's own capabilities. After becoming familiar with such tools, employees will feel empowered to keep working with customers asking for readers' advisory assistance. As a result, they will provide good service and continue to promote the library and its services to the community.

Talking about reading in a regular group discussion will lead staff to discover what type of books or genres their coworkers like to read. Familiarity with coworker reading interests can provide a good staff referral point if a readers' advisory inquiry goes beyond an individual's knowledge of a genre. The discovery process also can be expanded into a training opportunity for learning about appeal factors. Staff should be encouraged to practice asking each other about books they read and enjoyed and then be instructed to listen for clues in the responses.⁵ Those clues can help them determine what the reader found so appealing in the book, and these appeal factors can then be used by staff to assist a customer in finding that next good book to read. Practicing this will provide training in how to listen to others and help staff become comfortable with asking open-ended questions. This exercise also can be used to teach staff how to initiate readers' advisory conversations with customers. Working cooperatively with fellow staff members in this manner will further develop the "all for one, one for all" attitude, which will subsequently improve customer service.

Print tools may include titles from the "Genreflecting" or "Real Stories" series published by Libraries Unlimited, or *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* by Joyce Saricks and other readers' advisory guides from ALA Editions.⁶ These and other titles are specialized tools designed to aid library staff in learning about genres, authors, titles and readers' advisory in general and can be pointed out to customers as resources. Electronic readers' advisory databases might include NoveList (EBSCO), Books and Authors (GALE/Cengage), or Fiction Connection (Bowker: Books In Print).⁷ All of these are online subscription services to which libraries may provide access but these products are not directly available to customers for free access via the Internet. Training staff in the use of these electronic tools not only develops members' skills but allows them to pass that knowledge on to customers who wish to access these tools for themselves. This is another form of good customer service.

But print titles and databases should not be the only tools in the readers' advisory box of tricks. They do have their limitations. Being aware that such tools exist is not enough. Staff and customers need access and training to use them because, as the old saying goes, you can "lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." Other techniques exist, and these can be demonstrated or taught to staff who would then be able to practice while working in the library. These skills include techniques such as how to read a review, how to write an annotation, how to read a book in ten minutes, how to compile a book list, and how to create displays.

Each of these techniques introduces areas of reading interest and provides a way for staff to contribute to the library as a whole. For example, by learning how to produce an annotated book list or how to create a display for their branch, staff are providing something tangible that customers can see and use. Teaching these types of skills and encouraging their practice with coworkers provides staff with a chance to discuss them and trade ideas on ways of utilizing these new skills, and

ultimately working together as library Musketeers: "All for one, one for all." This allows staff to continue their own development—giving them the means to learn even more about readers' advisory. Their knowledge of authors, titles, series, genres, and nonfiction topics should grow and make them better employees, better readers' advisors, and make them capable of providing even better customer service. Many of these techniques are discussed in *The Readers' Advisory Handbook* edited by Jessica E. Moyer and Kaite Mediator Stover.⁸

Staff can be asked to write an annotation for a blog post about the titles they are reading so that those unable to attend the regular meetings could also learn about the different authors, titles, genres, and topics. The genre study program in St. Charles City-County highly recommends that all participants to do exactly that, as a means to reinforce retention of material and to encourage staff to practice writing annotations and to learn how to post to a blog. The district blog used for this purpose is *SCCCLD Book Challenge* and the genre study program posts appear under the "RAteam" and "The RAT Queen" accounts.⁹

Libraries should encourage staff to make use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, GoodReads, or LibraryThing. GoodReads and LibraryThing have an archival quality that allows users to search for titles, authors, subjects, or tags. Some libraries have even integrated LibraryThing for Libraries (www.librarything.com/forlibraries) into their ILS because it allows customers to tag books in the catalog, find read-alikes, and search for material using headings that are not part of the regular cataloging process. Customers are already using these tools, which are freely available on the Internet, and publishers are likewise making extensive use of these tools to market their books. Having staff use these media gives them the chance to keep up with publishing trends and further improve their readers' advisory skills. This form of social interaction also gives staff the opportunity to communicate with library users in a new way and may even allow them to reach customers who do not usually come into or use the library.

Although staff tend to be assigned to work in specific departments or areas of the library, any one of them may be approached by a customer looking for assistance in finding that next good book to read. And while it might be fun once in a while to arm the staff with swords and have them shout "all for one, one for all!" throughout the library, it is probably not good customer service. But encouraging staff to talk about books and reading, and providing them with the appropriate training, tools, and skills to conduct readers' advisory conversations with library users, is definitely good customer service.

Unleash the library Musketeers from among the staff and produce an "all for one, one for all!" attitude in the community.

References

1. Ann Bouricius, *The Romance Readers' Advisory: the Librarian's Guide to Love in the Stacks* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), 67.
2. Adult Reading Round Table, "Genre Studies," accessed July 15, 2012, www.artreads.org/genrestudies.html.

3. St. Charles City-County Library District, "Readers Advisory Team—Multi-Genre Study / Book Discussion Program—Round Four," accessed July 15, 2012, <http://bit.ly/NITcAR>.
4. Betty Rosenberg, *Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1982), 5.
5. Joyce G. Saricks and Nancy Brown, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989), 33.
6. Libraries Unlimited, "Genreflecting Advisory Series," accessed July 15, 2012, www.abc-clio.com/series.aspx?id=51789; Libraries Unlimited, "Real Stories," accessed July 15, 2012, www.abc-clio.com/series.aspx?id=51801; Joyce G. Saricks, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, 2nd edition (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2009).
7. NoveList is a comprehensive readers' advisory database produced by EBSCO Publishing. www.ebscohost.com/novelist; Books and Authors is a comprehensive readers' advisory database produced by GALE Cengage Learning. www.gale.cengage.com/booksand-authors; Fiction Connection is a Books In Print affiliated readers' advisory database powered by Bowker. www.bowkersupport.com/library/fc_nfc/index.html.
8. Jessica E. Moyer and Kaite Mediatore Stover, *The Readers' Advisory Handbook* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2010).
9. SCCCLD Book Challenge, "Search:'RAtteam' or 'The RAT Queen,'" accessed July 15, 2012, www.scccldbc.blogspot.com/#uds-search-results.