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# Finding Good Reads on Goodreads

## *Readers Take RA into Their Own Hands*

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In 2009, Kaite Stover examined the expansion of reader-centered social networking sites and what she called “the wild appeal factor” (see “Stalking the Wild Appeal Factor,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 3 [Spring 2009]: 243–46). Stover looked at several then-new sites that might be of interest to readers’ advisors, particularly in terms of how readers talk about books and reading in their own words. As Stover pointed out, the conversation about books is taking place on the web in a variety of forms, and as reflective practitioners, we need to be aware of those conversations happening outside the library walls.

In this issue’s column, Yesha Naik expands on this discussion by looking at how members of one bibliocentric social networking site, Goodreads.com, talk with each other and the broader reading community about books and reading. Yesha looks at reader discussions of titles in five diverse genres and what we learn from those discussions about reader interests. She then moves from this examination to explore how readers’ advisors might take advantage of this knowledge in their daily practice.

Librarianship is Yesha’s third career, but she finds that her previous incarnations as middle school teacher and college admissions counselor have well-prepared her for working as a YA librarian in a bustling neighborhood branch of Brooklyn Public Library. A 2011 graduate of the Queens College GSLIS, her professional fascinations include readers’ advisory, teen and children’s services, diversity in YA literature, and serving immigrant populations in the public library setting. She blogs at <http://bookishdesi.wordpress.com>.—*Editor*

**W**hen librarians think about readers’ advisory, we usually focus on the professional implications of the term: what it means to provide RA services to patrons, whether through one-on-one conversations, recommended reading lists, book displays, or even titles featured on our library websites. Thus far in the literature on RA, the role of the librarian as readers’ advisor has been highlighted. We have clear cut ideas about how to go about helping patrons find a book, which could include using a database like *NoveList*, creating a reading map as recommended by Neal Wyatt (see “Reading Maps Remake RA,” *Library Journal* 131, no. 18 [2006]: 38), or referring to appeal terms as described by Joyce Saricks (see *Readers’ Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 3rd ed. [Chicago: ALA Editions, 2005]).

However, avid readers don’t think in terms of readers’ advisory. They simply are interested in finding good books to read and then perhaps discussing them with others, and librarians may not necessarily be their first “go-to” source for book recommendations. In pursuing their reading interests,

readers are turning to online communities to discuss books and even to give and receive unofficial readers' advisory help. Neal Wyatt was among the first RA librarians to recognize the power of book-centered social media participation when she stated that it

expands the RA discussion and connects the collection and readers to each other in original, flexible, and idiosyncratic ways. It allows for reader-to-reader conversations sparked by interest, whimsy, and personal knowledge. It makes greater use of librarian expertise as well, offering another way to interact and offer suggestions. This larger and more fluid virtual conversation is in turn amplified by the sociability of the tools that support it, and the result is an ongoing discourse that continually grows and adapts.<sup>1</sup>

Wyatt explicitly lays out the various practical ways that librarians can use bibliosocial networking sites to facilitate their RA services. It is important to note that at a time when one could bemoan sites such as LibraryThing and Goodreads as taking away the role of the librarian, Wyatt enthusiastically embraces these sites and encourages other librarians to do so as well.

In these fluid conversations, reviews, and comments, many readers are using aspects of what librarians have traditionally thought of as readers' advisory skills and strategies. As Kaitie Mediatore Stover has eloquently stated:

these bibliosocial networking sites are getting the vocabulary of appeal out there to readers. Librarians enjoy these websites. We are being friended by our patrons, book group members, online friends, and strangers who, it would appear through osmosis, are picking up the lingo of readers' advisors and using it in their own descriptors of what they're reading. A web nation of feral readers' advisors is being born, who in turn will inform their friends and colleagues of good books to read using the language we've provided in our tags, book shelves, reviews, and annotations.<sup>2</sup>

Given the observable phenomenon that many readers flock to book-sharing social media sites such as Goodreads, LibraryThing, and Shelfari, it is important for librarians to pay attention to how these readers are interacting with each other.

This article, based on a master's project at Queens College, examines how readers in one such online community—Goodreads.com—discuss books and assist each other in finding “good books” to read in organic, natural, and sometimes messy online discussions and comments. In the course of their interactions on Goodreads, they intuitively employ what we think of as RA tools and strategies, such as those discussed by Catherine Ross, Lynne McKechnie, and Paulette Rothbauer,<sup>3</sup> and the appeal elements, as defined by Joyce Saricks,<sup>4</sup> but in an informal way, what Stover terms readers' advisory in the wild.<sup>5</sup>

## METHOD

In first examining the Goodreads site, a prominent link entitled “Explore” stood out as a good starting point. Clicking this led to a page entitled “Find Books,” in which the first section, called “Listopia,” consisted of a number of popular book lists ranging from “Best Young Adult Romance” to “Most Unique Female Characters” and even “Best Books of the Decade: 1980s.”

I examined five lists that all focused on very different types of books. The goal was to choose a diverse set of lists, in order to be as far reaching as possible and to avoid any personal biases towards or away from any particular genre. As the first page of each list displayed the top fifty titles contained in that list, I focused on the reviews and discussions surrounding book number twenty-five—exactly halfway down the page.

These five lists and corresponding books are

- Dystopia—*Swan Song* by Robert R. McCammon
- Best Crime and Mystery Books—*The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins
- Best Historical Fiction—*The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco
- Best Fairytales and Retellings—*Stardust* by Neil Gaiman
- The Best of Gay Romance—*Camp Hell* by Jordan Castillo Price

For each of these books, the first thirty reviews and ensuing comments were read and analyzed, and the following was tabulated:

- Appeal terms used to describe each book
  - The extracted terms were then categorized according to the four types of appeal elements explicated by Saricks: Pacing, Characterization, Story Line, and Frame.<sup>6</sup> These categorized terms were then analyzed for trends.
- How many people said they would read the book as a result of the discussion
- Other books and authors that were recommended by users to one another

## APPEAL TERMS

Goodreads participants employ a wide range of terms in discussing the appeal of books. These terms range from the more formal, classically worded to colloquial descriptions that still get the point across. For example, in discussing a slow-paced book like *The Moonstone*, one participant employs the phrase “leisurely 19th century style (for unraveling of plot)” while another states, “It can get slow at times—but worth it.”<sup>7</sup> Often the genre being discussed will dictate the type of language used in the appeal terms, with a more plot-heavy, fast-paced, or character-based book attracting more informal and loose use of language, like “Vic is so hilarious and neurotic! I cannot get enough of him,”<sup>8</sup> while a more literary or classic book

invites a more formal comment, for example, “The heart of the novel is in its exposition of semiotics—the world as a blizzard of signs and life and thought as their constant interpretation.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, formal or informal, participants use all of Saricks’s categories of appeal elements in discussing books.

Equally important are a kind of “negative appeal” terms that I am naming “repel terms.” These are used quite often in the discussion surrounding a book, to describe factors that may well repel a large portion of the potential readership for the book. Discussers were often observed thanking other participants for warning them about certain repel factors. They then would state that they would now *not read* the book. While this might strike a librarian interested in circulation as a negative outcome, it is actually quite a positive outcome from the perspective of readers, whose valuable time has been saved by reading the opinions of their trusted friends. Conversely, repel terms will not deter those who would actually be attracted to the very factor that the person using the repel terms finds objectionable. For example, many commenters react negatively to the sexual content in the book *Stardust*, and thus many commenters use strong repel terms to describe the book—terms such as “explicit sex scenes” and “vivid scenes of sex and violence”<sup>10</sup> However, these very descriptors, meant to repel one audience, will make the book more attractive to readers seeking books with sexual content.

In pulling out and listing all the appeal terms used by participants, certain themes and trends emerge. Each book has at least one appeal category that seems to be its strength, or one that tends to ignite the most discussion. For example, *The Name of the Rose* has the most appeal terms in the category of frame and tone, which gives the indication that this is its strength, while *Camp Hell*’s strength is characterization, evidenced by the overwhelming number of characterization appeal terms used by its discussers.

The nature and flow of a book discussion seems to be affected by the genre of the book being discussed. Different genres attract discussers who interact in different ways. Genres that have a reputation of being more “serious” or “literary” tend to attract discussion about theme and tone, while genres that are seen as being more “fun” attract discussion about plot and character. The tenor of each book discussion mirrors the strengths of that book.

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## HOW GOODREADS PARTICIPANTS SUGGEST BOOKS

The participants give reading suggestions in several different ways.

1. Writing a positive book review, especially one that overtly states that others should read the book in question.
2. During the course of a discussion after a review, they recommend other books as
  - a. read-alikes,
  - b. having similar themes or subject matter,

- c. titles that sharply contrast with the book being discussed but have some relevance.

3. Social reciprocity—having been inspired to read a book based on a particular review, participants then recommend another book back to the reviewer—a type of reverse RA transaction. The subtext seems to be “I took your book suggestion, now you should complete the social contract by taking my book suggestion.”

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## RESULTS

How often are participants encouraged to actually read a book (or stay away from a book) based on a discussion?

Each of the books has yielded fruitful discussions and passionate engagement. Many possible read-alikes have been suggested and discussed. Most participants seem to have already read the book in question, but there are a few who have not read the book and are, depending on the RA terms and selection factors discussed, either persuaded to read or not read the book. Contrary to my initial theory when starting the research, few people seem persuaded to read the book through reading the discussions. This is because most participants seem to have already read the book. Another possibility that is impossible to test is that there may be many people viewing and reading the book discussions but who do not participate—it is impossible to know how these invisible or lurking readers have been influenced by the discussions. In fact, in conducting online searches for book reviews, I have often come across a random Goodreads review listed as one of the top ranked results. This ubiquity of Goodreads reviews, while difficult to quantify, must be affecting at least a certain percentage of Internet users who may not even be Goodreads users but are simply seeking to read reviews of a book they are investigating. (But, that would be a whole other study.)

One factor that seems particularly strong for Goodreads users is that of trust. In general, though not always, participants tend to “know” the reviewers on whose review they make comments. This is a result of the social nature of Goodreads, wherein users can friend each other, and indeed many users are first lured to the site through invitations from “real life” friends. It follows that those who seem to know and trust the reviewer or other commenters are more likely to be swayed into stating that they will read the book. In fact most of the people who say that they would read the book as a result of the review seem to be at least slightly acquainted with the reviewer, even if only online.

There is a tendency for commenters who say they will read the book being discussed to then “shoot back” an RA suggestion to the original reviewer. The way the reviewer responds or does not respond to this reverse RA suggestion seems to be informed by the trust relationship between the two. When a commenter adamantly and forcefully recommends a book without a trust relationship, the reviewer tends to ignore or rebuff the suggestion. Whereas when there is reference to a preexisting

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trust relationship between the reviewer and commenter, the reviewer tends to react more favorably to the suggestion. One limitation of this study is that the sample sizes are so small that it is impossible to know if these are isolated incidents or if they are representative of a real trend. It would be fruitful for a future study to examine this phenomenon.

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## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In observing the conversations on Goodreads, I was impressed by how some users become quite involved and immersed in the discussions. It seems that there is a real hunger for meaningful online RA-centered book discussions, which sites like Goodreads are well positioned to tap into. Perhaps this is a result of the fact that these online discussions can take place in an asynchronous format, with participants contributing at times that are conducive to them, at times even reviving discussions that may have begun months ago. Also, perhaps the fact that users control their identity on the site (giving away as much or as little about themselves as pleases them) makes them feel freer to state their opinions and suggestions than they might in a more formal context. There is, in short, a convenience factor that makes online book sharing sites so attractive—there is no inconvenience of having to physically go to a certain location at a certain time to discuss only a certain book. Users may participate as much or as little as they like and still be part of the discussion. Because the site is so powerful, attracts millions of users, and makes finding and connecting with one's friends very easy and intuitive, it has the capability of easily attracting bookish participants. Because they can simultaneously discuss as many books as they like as well, Goodreads becomes a formidably flexible book discussion tool.

Past research shows that the browsing strategy most favored by patrons who physically come to the library—that of finding more books by their favorite author—is successful at yielding good reads, but limiting, as it stops working once they have read everything by that author.<sup>11</sup> Here the strength of online book browsing can counteract one of the weaknesses of physical library browsing: public librarians can help their patrons seeking RA assistance by teaching them how to use Goodreads as a virtual book-browsing tool. When patrons find the Goodreads page about a particular book they enjoyed, they are exposed to a RA goldmine: discussions about other books and authors, many of which are comparisons made between these books and authors and the original book. It is the online version of a browsing reader going to the library to find books by their favorite fiction authors, but it is as if there were then a book discussion happening right at the shelf, right in front of their favorite book, in which not only are people discussing the work at hand but giving profuse suggestions to read other writers and works that may be read-alikes or share similar qualities or themes. After all, “readers agree that choosing books by author is the most reliable method” to successfully

find a new book to read.<sup>12</sup> This preference of readers is matched by the capability of Goodreads to serve readers in the way they prefer to browse.

For patrons who prefer the physicality of the library over the virtual environment of Goodreads, librarians can mine the depths of Goodreads to create read-alike lists for popular authors which can then be posted in a location close to those authors' books. Of course, in this purpose, Goodreads (and other similar sites) would simply be adding to the wealth of information already available to librarians via online and offline sources such as NoveList, the Fiction-L discussion list, and *Genrelecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction*,<sup>13</sup> but one thing to keep in mind is that crowd-sourced online venues like Goodreads have the advantage of being able to provide up-to-the-minute information while more staid and authoritative resources can at times have the danger of being too static. For example, if one looks at some of the read-alike lists posted on the Fiction-L website, one will see that they have not been updated since their creation, which limits their usefulness as time passes.<sup>14</sup>

Another way that librarians can employ Goodreads is by creating a Goodreads account for their library and then inviting patrons to befriend them on that site. The more the librarians post on their Goodreads account, the more they will be building a reputation for being a good source of information for reading suggestions. Better yet is if they can link out from their OPAC to Goodreads and link back in to their library website and OPAC from their Goodreads entries.

As has been observed during the course of this research, trust is built by numerous interactions. If librarians can gain the trust of their patrons by interacting with them in the online book browsing environment, then they can begin to give RA suggestions to patrons at the point of need, at the time and place that a patron expresses the desire to know about more books of a certain type. Also, this type of interaction would eliminate the reluctance of patrons to “bother” the librarian. Here the asynchronous approach of Goodreads or other book discussion websites can be of great use in encouraging patrons to request help. Patrons who may be too self-conscious to express questions in person may become comfortable asking within the relative anonymity of the online environment.

In fact several libraries are already taking part on Goodreads. One such library, in Salt Lake City, Utah, has created a group page on Goodreads, where patrons can virtually gather to take part in book discussions or access content put up by the librarians.<sup>15</sup> This is an excellent way to bring the library out into the online environment where the patrons are already congregating rather than passively waiting for patrons to come to the library's website.

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## AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The further study of social networking sites that revolve around books is highly recommended, as this is a burgeoning area, not only in terms of online interactions but also in terms

of book discussion and the implications these discussions have on book selection. One further study recommended is to interview a cross section of Goodreads users to ask them how book discussions on the site have helped them or not helped them to choose books to read. Directly interviewing the users of the site would also enable researchers to learn about users' perception of the usefulness of online social book discussions and may even uncover other ways that users find these sites to be useful besides discussions and finding books.

For librarians specifically interested in online RA, it would also be helpful to interview Goodreads users to get a better sense of how they develop the type of trust relationship that gives them confidence in taking a reading recommendation. Good questions to ask would be: How often do they interact with people they already know in person versus people they only know through online groups? Do they trust people more if they know them in person? Or are there other equally important factors involved in establishing trust? Is it possible, for example, that they may trust others more if they know them from more than one online network, even if they do not know them "in real life?"

Another aspect of Goodreads that has remained unexplored in this article and that bears further research is the presence of groups that revolve around various topics. Some groups are small and book club like in nature, while others are vast and involve hundreds of members. These book clubs take different forms and act in disparate ways, but they all act to create community around books. Examining their activities and discussions would be a fruitful way to further study Goodreads.

Of course, while I have focused on Goodreads, other book-oriented online communities, including LibraryThing, Shelfari, aNobii, BookJetty, and many others, also merit study. According to one blog, there are at least forty such sites, and each seems to have its own particular strength and focus.<sup>16</sup> It would be interesting to do a content analysis study comparing all of these sites to see how they are being used, by whom, and for what purposes. How are the different online book-sharing networks similar and how are they unique?

Also useful would be to do a more in-depth study of any one of these other services, in the same vein that Goodreads has been examined in this study. Would one get similar or different results if one looked at Shelfari and LibraryThing? Could it be that users of different book-centered online communities are seeking and finding different uses for each of these sites? In short, could it be that a user seeking simply to catalog his or her books would be more drawn to one community, while a user seeking a community to interact with would choose a second, while a user simply searching for books by tags would choose yet another site? All of these ideas really only scratch the surface of what is an important new arena for RA research.

Until recently most RA research has focused on the RA transaction between librarian and patron. During the "RA Renaissance" of the 1990s and early 2000s, Joyce Saricks and others transformed the focus of readers' advisory to a patron-centric approach, based on supporting the emotional experience

that patrons seek in their reading. Saricks examined the natural way people talk about books to formalize the distinct appeal categories, so that librarians could learn to consciously dissect what precisely it is about books that appeals to readers.

Now online communities like Goodreads are reversing this—readers are talking, in gloriously messy detail, about books in a way that uses appeal terms but goes back to that elemental way of talking about books that avid readers have. In these online conversations, they help each other enjoy books in an organic, easy way. They are analyzing the appeal of books, but because they are not being made self-conscious, they are more naturally able to figure out what appeals to them and discover new reads.

This new paradigm of online social interaction around books opens up the arena for a much broader definition of readers' advisory. If librarians think of readers' advisory as our sacred territory, then the advent of online book discussion communities can make us feel as if we've lost control. But what if we change our vision of RA—redefine it as an activity in which all readers may participate? Ultimately librarians, libraries, as well as patrons stand to gain with this broader more generous definition and understanding of the term.

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