Readers' Services and the Library Catalog
Coming of Age Fiction? Or Non-Fiction?

Laurel Tarulli, Guest Columnist

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As readers' advisory services continue to develop in the twenty-first century, there are a number of important and interesting directions that are being explored. None of these is more critical to the future success of readers' advisory than the connection between RA service and the library catalog. With an expanding array of virtual services from ebooks to self-check to remote access to databases and other library resources, there are many library users who rarely set foot in the physical space of their libraries. The library catalog is the one place though where almost all library users interact with the library at some point. As Laurel Tarulli points out in her article, collaboration between public service staff and technical services staff offers an opportunity for libraries to expand and enhance their offering to readers. At the same time, expanding readers' advisory resources into the library catalog puts those resources in front of readers in a new way, becoming another tool in providing asynchronous readers' advisory service. Laurel Tarulli is the 2009 recipient of ALA's Esther J. Piercy Award and in 2010, received the Distinguished Alumni Award from her alma mater. A consultant for NoveList and active member of her institution's readers' services team, she holds the position of Collection Access Librarian at Halifax Public Libraries in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Widely published, Ms. Tarulli is also the author of the Cataloguing Librarian Blog and a frequent speaker at conferences on the topic of readers' services and the library catalog.—*Editor*

I n his recent essay "RA as a Transformative Act," Duncan Smith begins with the lines "Sometimes there is a magical quality to readers' advisory. Like when you are talking with a reader and their reading interests and yours overlap."[1] Readers' advisory services attempt to make connections with readers and books everyday in our libraries. We listen to our readers, finding key phrases, experiences and emotions that help us find another "good read" for our reader. And, as a bonus, we often feel our own excitement build all over again for a love of reading when we meet a reader with similar interests to our own. It's natural. Maybe, as professionals, we shouldn't get so excited talking about our work, but we're readers. And like all readers, we listen to others' conversations about the "best book ever!" when we're sitting on the bus, on the beach or even at the hair salon. People talk about books. And, when you can find another reader with similar interests to your own, you get excited and yes, it's magical.

READERS' ADVISORY

When most of us read Duncan's words, we think about the in-house RA conversations we have with readers. But, what about readers who don't like to visit the physical library or who don't feel comfortable talking to librarians? What about those readers who feel disenfranchised or feel a disconnect with our readers' advisors because of differences in age, gender, education or reading preferences. Simply put, what about all of those readers we never talk to or see? What if we can take our in-house expertise and provide our RA services remotely? Can we connect with other readers in their homes and encourage readers to share with each other? How can we reach the readers we never see and give them that "magical" encounter that is so exciting and fulfilling? Is it possible that the answer lies within the library catalog and among fostering a closer relationship between readers' advisors and catalogers? What if we can add value to our existing legacy catalogs by adding localized RA content, or even acquire a new catalog that allows for a community social space outside of our library walls? I know, that's a lot of questions! But, in an age where the majority of the population use social media to interact and prefer online services rather than one-to-one contact, these are questions that need to be raised. And, perhaps more importantly, questions that need to be answered.

The ideas presented here to assist in answering these questions might not be the only answer. Some of you may have found alternate and creative ways to face these issues, while others may still be exploring the best way to answer these questions. To that end, several ideas will be explored in this article. The first examines the relationship between frontline readers' advisors (those professionals who work in branches and belong to the readers' services team) and the backroom staff. For the purposes of this article, when I refer to backroom staff, I mean catalogers. Can fostering a stronger relationship between catalogers and readers' advisors enhance readers' services in our libraries and turn it into a thriving and core library service—within our branches and remotely?

The second idea explores the library catalog as a remote community space for readers. Library catalogs are facing a coming-of-age at the moment and are positioned to either thrive in our online environment, or disappear due to missed opportunities. They have the opportunity to become online, social environments that offer the same level of trust and social interaction as that of our physical library branches. Taking advantage of this, readers' services may be able to secure a strong position in influencing the function of these next generation catalogs, enhancing an already growing and popular service into a thriving, online service that reaches out to even more readers.

Throughout this article, the idea of an active, engaging relationship between readers' advisors and catalogers will lead the way to answering the question of whether or not our growing RA services and new catalogs can build a "coming of age" relationship. Can readers' advisors and catalogers work together to create a strong, interactive and remote readers' services? Or is that fiction?

WORKING TOGETHER

We really do ourselves, the profession, and our users a disservice when we isolate RA work into one department or set of librarians or staff. We should aim for an organization-wide culture of RA, and the folks in cataloguing, circulation, etc. need to be part of that.
—Barry Trott[2]

To view cataloging and catalogers as separate and apart from "public service" is, in Barry's words, a disservice and can result in missed opportunities for collaboration between readers' advisors and catalogers. There appears to be a divide in many libraries regarding who can become a readers' advisor. In some systems, it is only the degreed professional who is trained to talk about books, while other libraries foster a system wide approach that embraces and fosters an environment of reading and "book talk" at every level. What benefit are we providing to our readers if we limit readers' services to only select members in our libraries? Readers love to recommend books to readers. Limiting our RA teams to degreed professionals only limits our services and the success of those services due to factors that include resentment and a lack of new ideas or different perspectives. While in many smaller libraries all of the staff are encouraged to talk about books—including backroom staff, larger libraries continue to maintain that backroom staff are just that; backroom. However, for those of you who already collaborate with your catalogers, it soon becomes apparent that a cataloger's expertise in their area of a library's collection can become a strong asset to a readers' advisory team. For example, while a readers' advisor participates in daily interaction with readers, uses RA tools and attempts to stay current on the collection to provide reading suggestions, the cataloger of the fiction collection touches every fiction book that enters the collection. Often, this includes analyzing and drawing parallels between similar books by different authors, recognizing reading trends, and familiarizing themselves with less popular titles that hold the same elements as those high demand items on bestseller lists. In addition, while readers' advisors are holding in-house conversations with readers, the library catalog reaches all of those readers we never see or who don't wish to visit the physical library.

When considering these arguments, it seems natural to consider expanding catalogers' expertise to areas beyond that of traditional "cataloging" and encouraging them to become readers' advisors. In fact, it appears that training them in readers' advisory and encouraging them to join our team can only strengthen our services. In fact, they should become more involved in readers' services because, whether or not we've been taking advantage of it, they are already integral to the development and promotion of RA work.

With the growing use of our online presence as compared to our physical one, we need to explore how those users of the catalog can also benefit from our readers' advisory services. Because catalogers are the primary creators of our catalog

content, it is important to teach them what readers' services is and how readers look at the description of books and describe the experience of reading as a way to find books, rather than just simply relying on author recognition or subject headings. Understanding the benefits of working with catalogers so that locally created and broader RA content can be added to bibliographic records is a strong motivation for promoting a collaborative relationship. In addition, having catalogers support the integration of RA tools within the catalog (e.g., Chilifresh, NoveList, LibraryThing) can lead to strong allies and collaborative projects among staff and result in an even stronger readers' advisory services library.

How do patrons browse in our libraries? Do they browse? What collections do they browse? Catalogers spend their careers considering how patrons search the library. Readers' advisors have the expertise to understand readers and how they describe and look for books that are appealing. Collaborating can potentially provide us with new ways to utilize the skills of both disciplines and help not only those patrons who browse within our physical libraries, but also those who never step within our walls.

I do believe that partnering with "front-line" staff to find solutions to in-house library access is important. While readers' advisors know our readers, catalogers understand the collection and how to organize it, no matter the format. In an environment where online use is increasing and over 70 percent of holds placed on items occur remotely, catalogers and readers' advisors are poised in a unique position to take advantage of the new technologies available to us to reach these remote readers. Rather than providing readers' services as an in-house only service, where our conversations only happen within our library walls, we should explore ways to take advantage of our readers' trust and expand it into the catalog.

THE LIBRARY CATALOG AS A COMMUNITY SPACE FOR READERS

Our library websites, readers' blogs and our catalog are no longer "destination spots," rather they are found through gateways, pointed out to an individual by a friend, colleague, application or some type of outside source.

While there will be, for the foreseeable future, individuals who have bookmarked our catalog, blog or website on their browser, an increasing number of users find us through RSS feeds, smart phones, friend recommendations or a social networking presence (such as Facebook). Of interest is how we are addressing this new form of access to our services, in an environment of immediacy, brevity and short attention spans. Also of interest is what we are going to offer in our online presence that will make readers come to us, rather than another alternative.

Wouldn't it be exciting if, rather than just having author readings recorded and available on our websites, we provided recorded patron book discussions as well? Perhaps recordings of book club discussions linking them to the books in the

catalog? What if these discussions were led by a trained readers' advisor? Would that spark a great conversation within the catalog around books and lead to further recommendations and suggestions by other avid readers? Would it make our readers stop and think about what attracted them to their last great read? Perhaps they'd realize it isn't the mystery genre, but the descriptive language or the "tingly," uncomfortable feeling they experienced anticipating yet another confrontation among the characters.

What about inviting book clubs from outside the library to comment on their latest reading choices or reading lists? Or, putting out a general invitation to our avid genre readers to create reviews for our catalogs? By taking advantage of these avid readers' interests, we are inviting reader content within our catalog in a community sense, rather than from only a select group of readers' advisors who work within the library.

This should not be viewed as a way to undermine the knowledge and expertise of our existing readers' advisors. It is the necessary progression of our services. When we view the statistics regarding physical library visits and RA conversations versus our online and catalog traffic, the statistics clearly demonstrate that users are seeking out their own "next good read," without taking part in conversations with librarians.

However, in our new catalogs and in our "next" generation of catalogs, readers' advisors may not only be able to converse with readers within the catalog, but they will also foster conversations between readers. While readers can already tag, rate and review titles in many catalogs, book discussions, local summaries written by readers' advisors and appeal terminology can only be found within a small number of public library catalogs. With an eye to collaborating with catalogers, this can become a reality in many more public libraries. How? Working together will not only strengthen our services but pressure vendors into creating catalogs that offer the types of new functions we want, while maintaining or even enhancing traditional functions.

While many argue the library website should remain our destination spot and be the primary interface for providing links to our resources, we should also explore the idea of the library catalog as our gateway of choice. The latest catalogs allow a user to search the library catalog, website, blogs that we've identified as well as other data sources in a single search. Skokie Public Library, a client of AquaBrowser,[3] has added numerous data sources that can be searched in a single catalog search. Imagine being able to search our readers' blogs at the same time we're searching our catalog. Readers looking for books written by their favorite authors would also be able to find posts, written by the library's readers' advisors, that mention that author. Perhaps it will lead a reader to a simple review, or a post recommending similar authors and describing the appeals within those suggestions. The possibilities are endless!

We must also consider the growing use of mobile applications and the slow progression away from blogs. While many readers' advisory teams in libraries rely on readers' blogs to

reach the community, social media trends are moving beyond the blog to other platforms that allow for quicker and more immediate access to ideas, announcements and so on. Like the transition from a landline to the exclusive use of a mobile phone, smart phones and tablets are poised to overtake computers as the primary means of information consumption. How do our services reach users of these devices? Rather than being pigeon-holed into a one-vendor solution, software experts are casting their nets further and starting to look at library catalogs for mobile application development. What should the next library catalog application look like? Should it include recommendations from NoveList? Read-alike lists generated from the local book club or readers' advisory team? Should we encourage community readers to add reviews and promote the latest reviews on the main page of our catalog or links reviews to RSS feeds? Is it possible, with a strong collaborative relationship, to influence vendors and the functions they design for library catalogs? For example, imagine being able to offer remote readers the opportunity to participate in "live" book discussion taking place within the physical library through a link within the library catalog! These are all ideas to be explored at your own libraries. Like readers' services, these are not a one-size-fits-all model, but are used to demonstrate the possibilities and outcomes that may be achieved by collaborating with backroom staff.

What will our next generation of library catalogs look like? It's ultimately up to us to shape the look and feel of our next generation catalogs. Do we want to work together with catalogers, tapping into their expertise and combining it with our own? While we may be restricted by budgets and technology, we can be creative. What we aren't able to do now, we should be planning to do in the future. However, while we're waiting, there are some solutions and ideas to consider today. Working with catalogers allows readers' advisors to add appeals terminology as access points within the catalog. Rather than just genre headings combined with subject headings which are based elements such as locations and professions, we can create additional descriptive terms, such as "bittersweet" and "nostalgic." We also can work together to implement popular buzz words, including subgenres under the popular genre "narrative nonfiction." In addition, collaborating allows us to add links to online author readings, local events or even blog posts written by readers' advisors in our catalog records. Ultimately, we are only restricted by our own traditional definitions of what a catalog can do—and this mindset can be found equally among catalogers as among readers' advisors.

Cultivating an open, respectful and collaborative relationship will foster greater opportunities to try new things within the library catalog and provide a platform for pilot projects.

CONCLUSION

Readers' services is growing in popularity and importance within public libraries as emphasis continues to grow on leisure reading and libraries as social spaces. Library catalogs, too, are facing a pivotal point in their development. Rather than adhering to the strict traditional definition of an inventory, library catalogs are poised to become the main face of the remote library, offering remote access to all of our core library services through intuitive, interactive and searchable interfaces. The key is that, rather than becoming another social network, library catalogs offer as much or as little interaction as readers want. This can mirror our physical branches, where we have "browsers" and "sharers." Many readers just like to browse our displays or listen in on book discussions while others are interested in sharing their thoughts and reading preferences with staff. Our online presence should foster the same type of interaction.

While it is necessary to continue to emphasize the importance of the face-to-face RA conversations within our libraries, we must also accept that social software is redefining how our community views personal interaction. This has implications for RA practices. Our current RA services vary from good to great to exceptional, but there also are assumptions that RA work can only occur within the physical library, or by a select group of individuals.

Anyone who likes to read can share in the RA experience. This includes all members of our community who enjoy reading. Readers' services is no longer just about recommending books. It's also about conversations. Cataloging is no longer just about cataloging. It, too, is increasingly about conversations and interaction. To that extent, our library catalogs and the social, interactive community environment they are creating need to be explored as an avenue in furthering RA services and bringing reading suggestions to the reader—wherever they are.

References and Notes

1. Duncan Smith, "RA as a Transformative Act," in *The Library Catalog as Social Space: Promoting Patron Driven Collections, Online Communities, and Enhanced Reference and Readers' Services* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Libraries Unlimited, forthcoming).
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3. AquaBrowser is a discovery layer, or intuitive interface, that sits on top of an existing library catalog. It allows for customization for enhancing the discovery of library resources. For more, see www.serialssolutions.com/discovery/aquabrowser (accessed July 10, 2011).