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# Listening to Advisors

## *A Conversation About Readers' Advisory Services, Practice, and Practicing*

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**A**s RA service has moved from its second-wave renaissance during the late twentieth century/early twenty-first century (with a steady stream of reference tools, conference programming, and think pieces) into an often underpromoted but bedrock mainstay of the public library, what do advisors continue to discuss among themselves and see as areas of need? If you could gather a handful of advisors together, over a cup of coffee one rainy morning before book group began, what would they talk about? What would they ask each other? What do they know to be foundational about the service? As important, what might they suggest we all re-think? This column invites you to eavesdrop on such a conversation. It was conducted over email between six advisors: two at the start of their careers, two helping to define the field, and two who have lead the way for librarians, for a combined eight decades. These advisors share research, hard-won and lived-in lessons, showcase the luminous nature of RA work as well as its difficulties, propose a change for RA education, and, of course, each suggests a book to read.

While the conversation (which has been condensed and edited) began with a set of prompt questions ranging from best practices to RA education, it quickly became clear that the subjects on the minds of everyone centered on four key topics: RA education, common challenges, building reader-useful displays, and the importance of RA in libraries and our reading lives.

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### **ADVANCING RA EDUCATION: MAKE IT APPLICABLE**

*How can RA in the classroom better equip librarians for the service desk?*

**Kim Tipton:** A written assignment is good for RA, but I had days and days to craft the perfect answers. The real reference desk isn't like that—it's much more stressful. The patron is standing there, maybe impatiently. You're searching online sources while trying to ask them thoughtful questions. The phone might start ringing. Conducting RA on the fly during class would have been a more spontaneous interaction and given us the chance to practice. Another practical assignment is to visit a local library and ask a librarian to recommend a book, as a secret shopper. Paying attention to what questions we get asked, what resources they use, then reflecting on the interaction and what we thought was helpful, what we might have done differently, etc., would also be highly

## THE CONVERSATIONALISTS

Katharine Janeczek, Children's and Young Adult Librarian, Forbes Library, Northampton (MA)

**A word of advice:** "It is important to give the process of RA time and space. I think it's very beneficial to give the patron moments to express themselves, as well as evaluate and reevaluate what they're looking for. It's so easy to overfill silences in the moment, and those pauses might be useful for internal processing, or provide a gateway to a patron thinking out loud in a way that leads to a more favorable Reader's Advisory fit."

Lynn Lobash, Associate Director, Readers Services, New York Public Library

**A word of advice:** "Take a few minutes before the library opens and browse your collection. It is important to have a fresh picture of what is on your shelves every day. Maybe one of your favorites was returned and is ready for another reader, or maybe one of your go-tos is out and you need to identify an alternative. This is especially true when working with a floating collection."

Catherine Sheldrick Ross, FRSC, Professor Emerita, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

**A word of advice:** "Start with the reader and with what the reader says about the reading experience that is desired. The goal of readers' advisory work is not to improve reading taste or to get more people reading the classics or to push people up the reading ladder. The purpose is to help connect readers with the materials that they will engage with and enjoy. When you start with the reader, you avoid the pitfall of thinking of the book as something existing apart from any reader that can be ranked on a hierarchy of quality from low to high."

Joyce Saricks, retired readers' advisor, author of *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, and passionate fan of audiobooks.

**A word of advice:** "Understand how personal an interaction this is and how carefully, thoughtfully, we need to consider every interaction. RA isn't just throwing out a stack of books and hoping something works. Listen to what readers say and explore with them the possible suggestions. It's not what we love but what they want. This listening is a skill that helps in all our interactions—in the library and in life."

Kim Tipton, Adult Services Librarian, Crystal Lake Public Library (IL)

**A word of advice:** "I used to think that RA was simply helping the patron find a book similar to one they'd already read. Now I know it encompasses so much more than that: the teacher who needs books on a topic to supplement her class materials; the parent who brings their child in and does all the talking for the child; putting up a book display and choosing (or not choosing) books for it; or addressing the parent who wants to censor what their child reads."

David Wright, Reader Services Librarian, Seattle Public Library (WA)

**A word of advice:** "When it comes to RA, *People First, Then Books*. Your ability to relax, listen and enthuse with others is key. The rest can always be picked up later, and there are great tools to help you with connecting readers with books: Use Your Tools!"

useful. I think it's important to teach us to see the RA interaction all the way through and really engage the patron. There should be more focus in classes on the human interaction. I've seen librarians use a variety of print and online sources, print a list of suggested titles for the patron, and consider the interaction over.

**Katharine Janeczek:** Most of my readers' advisory experience has been gleaned from in-person interactions with patrons. Adding a practical element to instructional programs would be extremely valuable, as the personal experience of RA is very different from reading about it, or even discussing it. Of course, it's not possible to replicate

in-person interaction exactly as it would occur in a library setting, but some sort of mock RA exercise in class could be a great way of getting practice and gaining confidence. I remember answering mock reference questions in Information Sources and Services, and I think adding something similar for the purposes of practicing RA would be helpful, and also emphasize how important it is to develop readers' advisory skills.

**David Wright:** One scenario to try that is very reflective of real practice for novice and seasoned readers advisors alike would be to deliberately blindside the advisor with questions that focus on those areas or genres that they feel the least

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## READERS' ADVISORY

comfortable or familiar with. Perhaps multiple times. The point being not to humble advisors, but to help them consciously develop strategies for coping with this very common scenario, both emotionally in how to maintain composure and lean into the patron rather than backing away, and also in making use of tools in ways that feel legitimately helpful, and add value for the reader. I suppose the real masters level version of this exercise—although it is probably too elaborate to work well in real life—would be to have the questioner make up an imaginary genre that they like. In this case, no tools will help at all, and the advisor needs to learn to engage the patron to learn more about their taste—a good strategy even when we feel much more familiar with what a reader likes, but perhaps not with why they like it.

**Joyce Saricks:** Any exercise that compels us to talk about books makes us better. We started staff meetings by sharing a title we were reading. It gave us a chance to practice what we might say and to see what lines worked and didn't. When I taught, students always wrote a reader profile—and discovered it is harder than you might think to describe concisely what you enjoy and don't and why. No wonder readers are mum when we ask for that info! Students exchanged their profiles with another student, and suggested titles for each other. I think practicing talking about books is the key, and the more we do it, the better we are at it and the more natural it becomes. If you're also working in a library while in school, you can make that part of your routine in quiet moments on the desk with a colleague but also out in the world. I'm still stopped by people in the grocery store curious about what I'm listening to now—they remember me from the library and ask. If I were to plan a series of exercises, I'd start with talking about books, progress to the reader profile, and then face-to-face interviews with fellow staff members. That makes a less intimidating first step and builds skills and comfort.

**Catherine Sheldrick Ross:** The third edition of *Conducting the Reference Interview* offers guidance on this topic with exercises on a series of scenarios—statements from real readers and drawn from my interviews with avid readers. One person plays the role of the “reader” and uses one of the scenarios as the basis for playing the reader role. The reader doesn't spill the beans all at once but answers questions about reading preferences only in response to questions asked by the readers' advisor. Readers' advisors ask questions from the provided list of “Some Questions for Readers' Advisors.”

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### RA PROBLEMS: BLANKING OUT AND LEARNING GENRES

*The two issues that seem to worry advisors most are fear of drawing a blank and keeping up with genres. Catherine Sheldrick Ross has research data expressing these concerns.*

**Catherine Sheldrick Ross:** Between Winter 2002 and Fall 2009, I sent MLIS students at Western University into libraries to ask for help in finding “some good books to read.” Too often the scenario went something like this: the reader said that they enjoy poetry or science fiction or books with strong female characters or African American authors or a book “just like X.” In the unsuccessful transactions, the staff member often seemed to panic, bypassed the RA interview, and said something like “I'm afraid that I'm no expert in poetry” or “You can browse the shelves and look for the Science Fiction icon” or “I'm sorry but I've never read book X” or “I'm not very familiar with African-American authors/holocaust novels/true life stories of extreme adventure, but maybe if you browse over there you'll find something.” In general, the summary of the questionnaire data suggests that staff members wanted to be helpful—85 percent were described as pleasant and friendly—but too many lacked the particular training needed to actually be helpful. When the readers' advisory transaction was unsuccessful, some specific training gaps are indicated (and both relate to drawing a blank and keeping up with genres):

- The ability to find out, specifically, what kinds of books the user would enjoy (i.e., the RA interview)
- Insufficient familiarity with the range of genres that interests readers
- Insufficient use of professional readers' advisory tools and a tendency instead to rely on personal knowledge.

**David Wright:** Twenty years in, I definitely still have plenty of blank moments, and I don't know any readers' advisors who don't, really. I think there are a few tricks that I and my colleagues routinely rely on—a kind of manual override to the initial panic you may be feeling at a reader whose interests may be hard to draw out, or outside one's own realm of experience or powers of recall. One is to take—or feign—such a deep interest in the patron and their own interests that you just jump into the interaction fully as if launching into a voyage of discovery, or meeting a new friend. When your immediate reaction is to express interest and less-than-creaky levels of enthusiasm, it gives you room to play—room to hear what they're telling you. It also puts them on the spot a bit, which gives you something in common: here we are, both on the spot! Let's muddle through this together, and see what we can come up with! Playfully muddling through is I think a good way to think of it, less threatening for both parties. Best not to wait for that attitude to magically happen, though: just fake it 'til you make it, really. Finding tricks to override the perfectly natural tendency to panic is key, I think, to being able to have fun in the work.

**Lynn Lobash:** I would never claim I can recommend a book off the top of my head every time. I rely heavily on NoveList in my job. Sometimes you can't remember a title, or you just haven't heard of any of the books the patron says they liked.

**Joyce Saricks:** In more than twenty years on the RA desk, I never conquered the-mind-goes-blank syndrome, I just worked out ways to compensate. Remember that any handouts/lists you can share with the reader also help. We want to narrow the possibilities from “I just want a good book” and get into the ballpark of what might please that reader today. Lists and read-alikes help the reader identify what might work.

**Kim Tipton:** If I have a colleague at the desk with me, and if they're a big reader, I'll bring them in to help suggest something. For a long time, my library had a list of staff who read heavily in certain genres. We all knew it was OK to lean on each other for help. If I'm at the desk alone, I go right to the internet and use either the library's RA databases or popular sites with lists.

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## RA PROBLEMS: KEEPING UP WITH GENRES

**Lynn Lobash:** This is a tough one. You have to learn the subgenres, their themes, and appeals. I already mentioned NoveList and can't overestimate its value for me. I also like *Literary Hub* for keeping up on reviews. If you look at their sub-site, *Book Marks*, and click on “all categories” at the top you will find new books by genre plus an aggregation of reviews.

**Joyce Saricks:** Keeping up is hard. I think we have to try to read as broadly as we can—both books and reviews—and glean information from every source we have including library publications, popular magazines, podcasts, etc. Fans of a particular genre are often a great source of information on the state of the genre as well as authors and titles the library should have and we should be familiar with. We can't read everything but we do need to make a concerted effort to read as much as we can about titles and genres. Talk with readers, with fellow staff members, with colleagues about what they're reading; check reserve queues to identify hot new authors and titles; keep track of genres and the most popular authors within them and read or familiarize yourself with them. It's continuing education that never ends but often provides unexpected pleasures in the serendipitous discovery of interesting titles to share with readers.

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## RA ANSWERS: MAKE READER-USEFUL (NOT PRETTY) DISPLAYS (AND MAKE A LOT OF THEM)

*If RA has a magic bullet it seems to be displays.*

**David Wright:** Physical libraries need to do attractive collection marketing. Libraries that don't do it, or don't do it well are just profoundly less reader friendly. It's less about which books are chosen, let alone which theme, than about creating

ways for people to better relate to books (and, while browsing, relate to us and to the library as a whole). Libraries that look more like bookstores, with face outs and end caps and various displays, are really helping their patrons a lot. And while I say that themes aren't essential, some can really be expressive of a library's goals, such as having displays that celebrate and reflect the diversity of your patrons. Some high concept displays are basically mini-programs: Blind-Date-With-A-Book display, ones with gift-wrapped books that readers don't see until they take them home and unwrap them: that's a wonderful experience to give people—the gift of uncertainty, of mystery, of taking a chance.

**Lynn Lobash:** Collection merchandising should get more emphasis. For every one person that approaches a librarian to ask for a suggestion, there are many with whom we will never have a conversation. Displays, staff picks, shelf talkers, even face outs can serve as recommendations for these patrons. However, I think we need a paradigm shift in how librarians are trained to do collection merchandising. Librarians are trained to think top-down when it comes to displays. They start with a theme, create a clever sign, maybe add some props, and often order the books they need for the display. These displays take a long time and are difficult to replenish. I think we have a lot to learn from retail. I want to see many displays, in every section of the library, built from the collection up. Small displays in shelves, books on tables, books on the circulation desk, everywhere you turn, a display. Some of my favorite tricks of the trade include a simple display of highly recognizable and somewhat current titles on a table near the circulation desk. This is a great opportunity to upsell patrons waiting in line to check out. I love a media cross over display near public computers. I like a display of long-form journalism books in the spot where your newspaper readers tend to gather. Finally, I like to make a display for parents and caretakers in the kid's section. My all-time favorite is a staff pick display. Or better yet, staff picks + shelf talkers littered throughout the collection.

**Katharine Janeczek:** I've found displays to be a valuable form of passive reader's advisory. They change the aspects of the collection that patrons interact with, and can amplify underused or potentially unknown materials. Providing multiple modes of access to services is an important function of libraries today, and displays are a great way to make reader's advisory a patron-driven process.

**Kim Tipton:** Don't just use books, DVDs and music CDs work too. I look for diverse titles and authors, books in different languages. Our end caps fit about six items at a time, but I keep a basket handy with more titles and invite staff to fill in too. The displays create awareness around an issue, give patrons reasons to linger and browse, and introduce patrons to new authors and genres.

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## READERS' ADVISORY

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### RA IS FUNDAMENTAL: TO LIBRARIES AND TO READERS

*RA is about people, helping them, connecting with them, learning with them.*

**Catherine Sheldrick Ross:** It is increasingly recognized that RA is not just a nice thing to do but something that is central to the public library's mission: finding out what kind of reading experience the particular reader wants at a particular time in his or her life. A well-executed RA transaction offers this extra value: a personalized and tailored service that is responsive to what the individual reader wants to read, view, or listen to.

**Joyce Saricks:** Libraries are storehouses for stories of all kinds, both fiction and nonfiction, in a wide range of formats. And readers' advisors are the keys to this storehouse, this world of stories. We're the ones who make them available and who identify what might satisfy readers. Stories intrigue, satisfy, send us on the paths of new discoveries, confirm our beliefs and challenge them. Stories—and our libraries—offer something for everyone, and as long as stories exist, libraries will need dedicated staff to share them with readers.

**Katharine Janeczek:** I think that there's perhaps a mentality of RA being the icing on the cake, a fun task, but it's really a very valuable, marketable aspect of library services. Letting the public know that this is something libraries provide, and that this is an essential part of reference, is significant. Finding the joy in readers' advisory is, I think, truly important; it should be a fun, flexible, and patron-driven experience. When you can act as a conduit between a patron and a resource that they need or want, that's a special and unique feeling.

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### WHAT TO READ AND SUGGEST TO OTHERS

To close, each advisor has a book to share:

**Katharine Janeczek:** *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* by Adib Khorram was one of my favorite YA books of 2018. Darius calls himself a "fake Persian" in uncertain moments as he grapples with his identity within in his family, and within the world at large, as a gay, teenage Iranian-American with depression. The feeling of potentially not being real, not being of this world, or not fitting in the place you were told you should belong, runs beautifully throughout the book. Share it with teens and adults who've doubted their own reality at one point in time, and who enjoy nuanced coming-of-age tales from an honest and tender narrator. There are many different types of love in this book, and Khorram brings it all to life for us, in both light and heavy moments.

**Lynn Lobash:** I am currently reading *Golden Child* by Claire Adam. Opening this book (every time) is like stepping into the home and lives of this family in rural Trinidad. The imagery and the almost vignette-like domestic scenes are stunning. For readers who enjoyed *The Kite Runner* and *Sing Unburied Sing*.

**Catherine Sheldrick Ross:** For readers who enjoy learning about the natural world at the same time that they are being entertained, I suggest *The River of Consciousness*, Oliver Sacks's last book. This book is a genre-crosser, combining elements of Sacks's own autobiography, details from the lives of such scientists as Darwin, Freud, and William James, and clearly written accounts of evolving scientific discoveries about topics as diverse as the chemical messengers that direct the growth and movement of plants, disorders of neural speed in people with postencephalitic parkinsonism, and the genius among invertebrates—the octopus—which has half a billion neurons distributed between its brain and its eight arms (in comparison, we learn that the mouse has only 75 to 100 million neurons). The river of consciousness in the book's title points to the kinship and connectedness that Oliver Sacks sees as linking all living things.

**Joyce Saricks:** Diane Setterfield's *Once Upon a River*. Set along a river very like the Thames in 1880s England, this is an elegantly written, heartwarming, imaginative tale of the rural residents and an eventful year from one winter solstice to the next. Vividly drawn characters, multiple intertwined story lines, families, secrets, and touches of romance and magic make it a good suggestion for a range of readers.

**Kim Tipton:** *Code Name Verity* by Elizabeth Wein. Verity is a Scottish female spy during WWII who is taken hostage in France by the Gestapo and is being forced to write down her story and give up secrets. Verity tells her story in the form of a diary, creating a sense of intimacy and urgency. This young adult book would appeal to readers who like strong female leads/female friendships and historical fiction. There are two other books in the series (a prequel and a sequel), so if you enjoy this one, be sure to check out the others.

**David Wright:** *Montana, 1948* by Larry Watson. It is one of those perfect little books that has appeal for so many different kinds of readers. Its small size and inherent suspense make it a good nonthreatening read for novice readers or perhaps those learning English; the writing is wistful and beautiful but not fancy. It makes a nice change of pace for both crime fiction fans and literary readers. Although it was written by a white male, it touches on issues of race and nicely complements that ubiquitous high school favorite, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And as I know that librarians are always on the lookout for just that kind of sure bet, I figure it makes a good suggestion for just about anyone who might be reading this—it is a dynamite little book.