
RUSA Books Awards

Listening to the Experts Who Create the Lists for America's Readers

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To celebrate the past and present work of the RUSA book award committees, we asked a selection of chairs, vice-chairs, and members to discuss the work that goes into choosing the winning titles and how to use the lists when working with readers. Their thoughtful comments and reflections inform, excite, and invite new ways of using the award lists and expand and enrich advisors' work. The column concludes with a curated list of titles to share with readers.—*Editors*

RUSA's award lists are announced in January, heralding a last expert look at the previous year's best literary efforts. In the sea of award winners and best-of-the-year lists, the RUSA awards are particularly notable because they are selected by librarians, librarians who work with readers, suggesting next great reads and aiding in the discovery process. So important is the reader in this undertaking that written into the award criteria for many is a demand that attention be paid to the reading (or listening, or cooking) experience. Valuing a book because of the ways readers will experience it, interact with it, make use of it—simply enjoy it—is one of the delights of the RUSA award roster.

The process is another. Librarians read these books. They read them in frantic waves of keeping up. They read them in slow delight, forgetting the huge TBR pile awaiting them. They read sections aloud during intense meetings when deciding the winner. In what serves as a vital illustration of our commitment to readers and books, every year dozens of librarians sign up for this work, promising to spend the year reading with an intensity and focus that is largely unheard of in today's frantic and fractured media landscape. Their dedication often goes unnoticed in the fanfare of the announcement, but their work is critical. It creates a link between our profession, the publishing world, and the reader. A connection that ties us into the lifecycle of a book in a way we know to be resonant and meaningful. A connection that has existed in RUSA since 1944 when the Notable Books list was first announced, one that runs in an unbroken but beautifully branching line to a cold January night in 2022 when the inaugural LibLearnX debuts, and once again the RUSA book awards are announced.

These awards rely on the expertise of librarians. Librarians who take their love of reading and go above and beyond to provide critical, thoughtful and meaningful contributions to the creations of these lists. The value of these lists not only provide an ability to read beyond our interests, but to grow professionally and make lifelong friendships. A committee

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member's role and experience is just as important as the contributions these lists serve to our profession and our readers. This article provides a variety of perspectives and thoughts from professionals who have served on various award committees, reflecting on their experiences, criteria they have used to choose titles, and the many uses these lists have in our work.

THE VALUE AND EXPERIENCE OF SITTING ON COMMITTEES

One of the strengths of RUSA is the collection development and readers' advisory committees, which publish recommended lists to purchase for the general reader each year. I have served on several of these committees in the past twenty years, including the Notable Books Council; The Outstanding Reference Sources; the Dartmouth Medal; the Sophie Brody Medal; and the Reading List. Each committee has a different purpose.

There is a lot of work (and reading) required to serve on the book list committees (between November and January, your magazines, newspapers, and movie queues will pile up!). However, each committee member has different experiences, expertise, and strengths, and the result of a diverse committee is a stronger list for a general audience (and a diverse society).

For example, the Reading List Committee focuses on the best writing from eight different genres (and each genre is its own universe of writers and fans!). Through my experiences on that committee, I learned from the other committee members how to identify "good" writing in each of the genres, as well as the best review sources. For example, before I joined the Reading List Committee, I had very limited experience with the romance genre. However, I learned there is a group of high-quality titles published for each genre every year, and I learned how to identify outstanding romance books (and other genres too). I recommend serving on one of these committees to continue expanding your horizons!—*Edward Kownslar, Head of Public Services, Ralph W. Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University, member The Notable Books Council, 2021*

MULTIPLE WAYS TO USE THE LISTS

Conversation Starters

Creating a concise list for so many genres is no easy task. It must include reads for diehard fans and newbies, recognize the ebb and flow of trends, and sometimes even define a novel's place in the genre spectrum. Because of this, the Reading List is best viewed as a whole. Our top picks for each genre are excellent reads that we, of course, believe many readers will appreciate. However, each genre comprises a myriad of subtle flavors. It's here where our short lists shine,

capturing other tastes readers enjoy. We're not expecting that every, say, fantasy reader will love every one of our five choices—though they might!—but at least one of the picks will resonate with them. Please take our list as an inspiration, a box of pieces you can riffle through to find that perfect fit for your RA puzzle of the hour. Each piece of the list works as an excellent starting point for the RA consultation. Someone who feels less comfortable recommending within a particular genre can feel confident suggesting these titles. Beyond that, discussion of the five titles will spark a conversation that defines exactly what the reader desires. In this way, the Reading List serves as both the map and the X that marks the spot.—*Matthew Galloway, Buyer, Anythink Libraries, Colorado, chair of The Reading List Council, 2019*

Use Appeal To Introduce Books To Readers

The ALA Sophie Brody Award honors the year's best in Jewish fiction and nonfiction for the general reader. This niche award can sometimes be challenging to use in a general readers' advisory context, but this year's winners can serve a variety of general RA purposes. Our winner, *The Nightingale's Sonata*, can be read by anyone looking for a compelling biography, especially a historical biography of a woman facing challenging times and circumstances. *The Guarded Gate*, one of our honor books, is a timely look at America's immigration past and will appeal to those interested in modern politics or US history. Our final two honor books, *Strangers and Cousins* and *The World That We Knew*, are both fiction titles that can find a wide audience. Readers looking for character-driven and intergenerational family stories will love *Strangers & Cousins*, and Alice Hoffman's magical realism recommends itself in *The World That We Knew*.—*Erin Fishman, Adult Services Librarian, Cascades Library, Potomac Falls, VA, chair of The Sophie Brody Award committee, 2019.*

Mine the Longlists, The Shortlists, The Winners

Readers' advisory is woven into the very DNA of the Andrew Carnegie Medals for Excellence in Fiction and Nonfiction. The criteria for the awards are straightforward: fiction titles must possess exceptional literary merit; so, too, the nonfiction works, but nonfiction titles must also make a significant contribution to the subject area addressed, and/or make a specialized body of knowledge accessible to the nonspecialist. Committee members evaluate books on their appeal to adult readers who read for pleasure and edification. The Carnegie longlist, released in early fall, presents a robust assortment of titles librarians can feel confident in recommending throughout the year and beyond. The shortlist, consisting of three fiction and three nonfiction titles, is an even handier RA source, and each title is an outstanding book group pick. As the committee selects the two winners, they seek artistic excellence, but also enticing subjects and compelling points of view. Carnegie books must be truly engaging and provocative, works that will

entice readers, even those who might not have imagined being drawn to the topic covered or the genre. The hope is that the Carnegies will encourage readers to both deepen their appreciation for favorite topics and genres and to try something different and mind-expanding. For further suggestions, *Booklist* invites each Carnegie finalist to prepare a recommended reading list, unique lists which can be shared with patrons so that they can explore each Carnegie book's world more expansively. These lists can be found on *Booklist's* website under the feature titles "What (author name) Wants You to Read."

Here are links to the 2021 lists:

- [What Ayad Akhtar Wants You to Read](#)
- [What Claudia Rankine Wants You to Read](#)
- [What James McBride Wants You to Read](#)
- [What Megha Majumdar Wants You to Read](#)
- [What Natasha Trethewey Wants You to Read](#)
- [What Rebecca Giggs Wants You to Read](#)

—Donna Seaman, *Editor, Adult Books, Booklist, chair of the Andrew Carnegie Medals for Excellence, 2020*

Spread the Word About Audiobooks

The audiobook industry continues to boom, and librarians are seeing more and more demand for high quality audiobooks. The Listen List, a collection of the year's twelve most outstanding audiobooks along with listen-alike suggestions, is a great way to get the word out about the year's most notable titles. Here are a few ways that libraries can use the Listen List to conduct effective listener's advisory:

Displays

Displays are tried-and-true and work very well with seasonal themes. October, for instance, is the perfect time to feature past horror titles, along with listen-alikes from the list, too.

Keep up the conversation

Look for opportunities to bring up Listen List titles. It's as easy as saying, "This is really great in audio, too!" It's remarkable how this simple comment opens the door for great audio conversations.

Re-think shelving

Think outside of the box when it comes to shelving. One idea is to file audiobooks next to print books. This is especially fun when you have graphic novel audiobooks, as many graphic novel readers are open to listening, too. Another idea is to move the entire audiobook section so that it catches the attention of potential listeners. At my library, we moved the audios next to the large print, since many of the same patrons benefit from both formats.

Write!

Many libraries publish book reviews or blog about books online. Try incorporating audio reviews, too, highlighting Listen List titles or noteworthy narrators and productions.—Sarah Hashimoto, *Community Engagement Manager, Jackson District Library, Jackson, MI, chair of The Listen List Council, 2019*

Indirect RA

These lists are great for indirect reader advisory. Make a sign that says Librarians Select the Best Books of 2019, put it on a table and surround it with the books on the list. Shelf talkers are my favorite form of collection merchandising. Something as DIY as 3 x 5 cards with 2019 Notable Book printed in Sharpie will do the trick. For patrons who love a good reading challenge, print out the list and let them check them off. If your library works the way mine does, you probably ordered many copies of these books and they have been in steady circulation for the past year and now they are starting to show up on your shelves in multiples. The timing couldn't be better for merchandising these titles recommended by your peers who did a lot of reading last year. Finally, read them yourself; there are some truly special books on that list.—Lynn Lobash, *Associate Director, Reader Services, New York Public Library, vice-chair of The Notable Books Council, 2019*

Feed Your Book Club

A great way to utilize the CODES List: Cookbooks is to host a cookbook book club. Members read and cook from a monthly selection and discuss their opinions on the recipes, stories, and design of the book while sharing samples of what they made. Not only avid home chefs but also folks who are aspirational cooks enjoy reading and attending meetings. There are many types of cookbooks out there, so varying your selections among celebrity chefs, travelogue, cuisine based, gimmick, and how-to titles increases appeal and expands horizons. Take notes and write a collective review of the title or give it a star rating to create buy-in with the group, but most of all have fun trying new cuisine and techniques in the kitchen.—Sarah Tansley, *Branch Manager, Roden Branch, Chicago Public Library, member of The CODES List: Cookbooks, 2019*

Compete Against Wikipedia

Patrons routinely use Wikipedia to get a basic grasp of a subject before trying for more information. They're open to the kinds of clear overviews that are provided in general and subject encyclopedias, but it may not occur to them to give those items a try. The Outstanding Reference Sources list covers topics that are of current and perennial concern to patrons—infectious diseases and conspiracy theories,

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for example. Why not have copies of some entries available at opportune moments, and be ready to recommend other books on the same topics? Coronavirus will have patrons talking, and *Health and Medicine through History*, edited by Ruth Clifford Engs, and *Infectious Diseases: In Context* edited by Thomas Riggs, will surely offer handy synopses of related topics that could be used to create flyers. Springboard from those to recommending Lawrence Wright's *The End of October*, in which a killer virus stalks humanity. Does your book club read historical fiction? They might enjoy the background provided in *Encyclopedia of Women in World Religions* and could be encouraged to try related classics like Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*. On the more leisurely side, baseball season can be celebrated using material from James E. Brunson III's *Black Baseball, 1858–1900*, with baseball novels and stat books ready on the side. Lastly, push your humor collection by whetting patrons' appetites with *American Political Humor*, edited by Jody C Baumgartner. Don't forget, all these efforts can work on your website and in your newsletter just as in person.—Henrietta Verma, *Credo Instruct*, member of *The Outstanding Reference Sources committee, 2019*

Reference Books and Readers' Advisory

Book award lists can be a great tool for starting readers' advisory conversations and getting ideas for new connections between titles and readers. The items on the Reading List or Notable Books List give both experienced and new readers' advisors some jumping off points and also point out up and coming authors to consider. But what about the reference book awards? So many people think that print reference is dead or at least dying. While reference books (other than those RA-focused ones) have not generally been considered as valuable to the work of readers' advisors, there certainly are some titles that are classified as reference books that have a narrative feel or approach and might be read for enjoyment as much as for pure information. These books could easily be in the circulating collection of a public library and provide nonfiction readers with much enjoyment. They can also complement fiction reading, helping to fill in supporting details of place, times, and characters. For instance, one of this year's Dartmouth honorable mentions was *Disability Experiences: Memoirs, Autobiographies, and Other Personal Narratives*, which gathers together an exceptionally interesting collection of first-person glimpses into the lives of persons with disabilities from the fifteenth century to the present. Fascinating in itself, this book also gives readers ideas of other places to look for writing that speaks to their condition. So before dismissing reference books as just informational consider the many ways an avid reader might find them useful.—Barry Trott, *Adult Services Consultant, Library of Virginia, chair of The Dartmouth Award, 2020*

RUSA AWARDS: CELEBRATING DECADES OF SHARING BOOKS

The treasure trove that is the RUSA awards lists dates back nearly eighty years, offering readers and the librarians who work with them a rich collection of titles to browse and explore. To celebrate the lists, we asked librarians who have served on these award committees to pick just a few titles to highlight to readers. This selection includes work from every award but represents only a fraction of the great books waiting to be discovered.

All Clear by Connie Willis, read by Katherine Kellgren (The Listen List)

An Extraordinary Union: A Novel of the Civil War by Alyssa Cole (The Reading List)

Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are? by Frans de Waal (The Notable Books Council)

Blue Heaven by C.J. Box (The Reading List)

Children of Earth and Sky by Guy Gavriel Kay (The Reading List)

Dessert Person by Claire Saffitz (The CODES List: Cookbooks)

Did You Ever Have a Family by Bill Clegg (The Notable Books Council)

Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World edited by Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood (The Dartmouth Medal)

Garden Spells by Sarah Addison Allen (The Reading List)

Gods of Jade and Shadow by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (The Reading List)

Heavy: An American Memoir by Kiese Laymon (The Andrew Carnegie Medals)

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi (The Notable Books Council)

Horror Fiction in the 20th Century: Exploring Literature's Most Chilling Genre by Jess Nevins (Outstanding Reference Sources).

In the Country: Stories by Mia Alvar (The Notable Books Council)

Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong—and the New Research That's Rewriting the Story by Angela Saini (University Press Books for Public and School Libraries)

Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking by Toni Tipton-Martin (The CODES List: Cookbooks)

Library Programming for Autistic Children and Teens by Amelia Anderson (Outstanding Reference Sources)

Me Before You by Jojo Moyes (The Reading List)

Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster by Adam Higginbotham (The Andrew Carnegie Medals)

Mistress of the Art of Death by Ariana Franklin (The Reading List)

Moonglow by Michael Chabon (The Sophie Brody Medal)

Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996 by Seamus Heaney (The Notable Books Council)

Songs for the Butcher's Daughter by Peter Manseau (The Sophie Brody Medal)

Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel, read by Kirsten Potter (The Listen List)

Temporary by Hilary Leichter (The Notable Books Council)

The Aleppo Codex by Matti Friedman (The Sophie Brody Medal)

The House of Broken Angels, written and narrated by Luis Alberto Urrea (The Listen List and, in print format, The Notable Books Council)

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot (The Notable Books Council)

The Only Good Indians by Stephen Graham Jones (The Reading List)

The Spymaster's Lady by Joanna Bourne (The Reading List)

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen (The Andrew Carnegie Medals)

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien, read by Bryan Cranston (The Listen List)

The Tiger's Wife by Tea Obreht, read by Susan Duerden and Robin Sachs (The Listen List)

The Trial of the Chicago 7: The Official Transcript edited by Mark L. Levine, George C. McNamee, and Daniel Greenberg, narrated by a full cast (The Listen List)

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead (The Andrew Carnegie Medals)

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration by Isabel Wilkerson (The Notable Books Council)

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle by Haruki Murakami (The Notable Books Council)

This list is curated by Barbara Bibel, Sarah Hashimoto, Bill Kelly, Brian Kenney, Lynn Lobash, Sharon Rothman, Joyce Saricks, Jacqueline Sasaki, Sharron Smith, Barry Trott, Henrietta Verma, and Neal Wyatt