Readers' Advisory
Craig Clark, col. ed.

Thinking About Books

Craig Clark

I have been a student of readers' advisory (RA) for more than 25 years. Librarianship is a second career for me, and I had no exposure to the practices of RA until I took a class in my second year of library school. It was there that I met the late Dr. Connie Van Fleet, a knowledgeable and enthusiastic professor who encouraged me to parley my previous customer service experience into public librarianship. Her RA class was the most entertaining and eye-opening course I attended in my two years at Kent State University because it was there that I embraced two of S. R. Ranganathan's laws: every reader his or her book and every book its reader. I went on to work in Cleveland Public Library's Popular Library, a room that held new fiction and popular nonfiction. The staff in Popular Library created booklists, led a book discussion, curated the various genre shelves, and shared their knowledge of reading subjects in an organic way working directly with patrons. Although it has been many years since I worked at CPL, I will always be grateful to the library staff for fueling my interest in RA services.

I was delighted and a bit surprised when Barry contacted me and inquired if I was interested in editing an RA column for *RUSQ*. For the last 14 years, with a lengthy hiatus during the pandemic, I have worked as a self-proclaimed freelance librarian. Throughout those years I contributed nearly 200 reviews to *Booklist* and the ambitious but short-lived *IndiePicks Magazine*, updated several NoveList articles, wrote a reference book, and served on RUSA CODES Reading List and Notable Books Council as well as the Carnegie Medals for Excellence in Fiction and Nonfiction. During these years I learned that central to RA are intelligent and passionate professionals in a variety of fields including librarians, independent booksellers, and publishers, all of whom, in a variety of ways, are connecting readers to their books. I'm hoping to engage my peers and mentors alike to discuss and elaborate on various aspects of RA services.

RA has grown exponentially during the last 25 years. In 1998, Nancy Pearl launched "If all of Seattle Read the Same Book," NoveList was in its early years, and continuing education sites like Webjunction.org were a few years from creation. Today, RA is an accepted practice with librarians, publishers, and readers producing lists, reviews, and recommendations in across many platforms. However, I'm curious to discover how RA looks in theory and practice, from curriculum standards in library schools to continuing education and research. There are several topics I would like to explore in future columns: Is there current research either by graduate students or professionals on the effectiveness of various strategies of RA? When I was in library school there were discussions about the necessity of libraries due to the phenomenon of super bookstores like Borders and Barnes and Noble. The title of my thesis was "Defining User Behavior in the Coffee Shop Area of a Super Bookstore, a Grounded Theory Approach" (reading this paper cures insomnia). The super bookstore has mostly gone the way of the dinosaur, but libraries often have coffeeshops and merchandising, and displays in libraries have incorporated a more professional and retail-oriented look. Innovations

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in RA and librarianship in general often reflect societal interests. Does your library find success in creating book recommendations on social media? Are there other innovations in RA services that are measurably successful or unique to your system? Lastly, what does the future hold for RA services? How does RA look in 25 years? Will in-person RA be challenged by the recent rise in AI apps and services or, as with the super bookstore, will librarians incorporate the best AI systems to allow readers to find their books more easily and provide superior customer service to our patrons.

I look forward to hearing from my fellow librarians who have an interest in collaborating on topics relevant to the current state of RA as well as those who are interested in the advancement and continuing evolution of the field. If you would like to write a column on the topics mentioned in this article, or you have your own idea for a piece, please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss the details of contributing to *RUSQ.*