

## Readers' Advisory

Craig Clark, col. ed.

# RA Toolbox

## "Best of" and Awards Lists

Craig Clark

The impetus for this column began on a Sunday morning while I was reading the *New York Times*. The Book Review section on September 1, 2024, did not present the traditional review format, but instead the headline read: "The 100 Best Books of the 21st Century." The list was originally published online in July 2024. In addition, the *New York Times* also created a survey for the public to enter their favorite books as a response to the list and published it online on July 18 as "Readers Pick Their 100 Best Books of the 21st Century" with very different results. As a readers' advisor, I love a good reading list and I became curious as to the methodology of this particular list, how the selections on both the "experts" and public choices compared with American Library Association lists and awards, as well as the utility of the recommendations for RA librarians. Effective readers' advisory requires a constant state of learning and building a knowledge base using online tools, print resources, and juried award or "best of" lists to deliver quality recommendations to or patrons.

The *New York Times Book Review* "The 100 Best Books of the 21st Century" methodology is straightforward:

In collaboration with the Upshot—the department at The Times focused on data and analytical journalism—the Book Review sent a survey to hundreds of novelists, nonfiction writers, academics, book editors, journalists, critics, publishers, poets, translators, booksellers, librarians and other literary luminaries, asking them to pick their 10 best books of the 21st century.

We let them each define "best" in their own way. For some, this simply meant "favorite." For others, it meant books that would endure for generations.

The only rules: Any book chosen had to be published in the United States, in English, on or after Jan. 1, 2000. (Yes, translations counted!)

After casting their ballots, respondents were given the option to answer a series of prompts where they chose their preferred book between two randomly selected titles. We combined data from these prompts with the vote tallies to create the list of the top 100 books.<sup>1</sup>

One minor flaw in the methodology is allowing respondents to define "important" as how they wish. However, upon comparison with other book awards and lists, vague definitions are the norm whether there are five or 500 judges. The Pulitzer Prize for fiction FAQ page states: "There are *no set criteria* for the judging of the Prizes. The definitions of each category are the only guidelines. It is left up to the nominating juries and the Pulitzer Prize Board to determine exactly what makes a work *distinguished*."<sup>2</sup> The American Library Association's (ALA) Notable Book Council, on which I served several years, states its goal: "to make available to the nation's readers a list of 25 very *good*, very *readable*, and at times very *important* fiction, nonfiction, and poetry books for the adult readers."<sup>3</sup>

Results of any "best of" list can be debated ad nauseam



I authors including Min Jin Lee and Stephen King. These

As stated in the introduction of this article, I was curious how the *New York Times* list compared

I included the following awards in the comparison: ALA Notable Books, Andrew Carnegie Medal for

One hundred titles over the span of 24 years is a large list and there are more similarities at the top

**Table 1.** Number of NYT best 100 titles listed in other awards or lists

	<b>Notable Books Council</b>	<b>Carnegie Medal Winner or Finalist</b>	<b>Booklist Editors' Choice</b>	<b>Library Journal Best Books</b>	<b>Pulitzer Prize Winner or Finalist</b>	<b>National Book Award Winner or Finalist</b>
<b>No. of Titles</b>	48	7*	33	45	24	19

\*First awarded in 2014

of the *New York Times* list. It should also be noted that the number one title on the *New York Times* list *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante (2012) did NOT appear on any awards or best lists. Part of the allure of her riveting Neapolitan novels is the mystery surrounding her identity. Her novels also appear three times on the list with *The Story of the Lost Child* (#80) and *Days of Abandonment* (#92). A strictly analytical take on a definition of "most important book" goes to Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (#7). His was the only title that appeared on every list or award in table 1. The other most awarded or mentioned books on the list were *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (#21) by Matthew Desmond, *Between the World and Me* (#36) by Ta-nehisi Coates, *The Great Believers* (#64) by Rebecca Makkai, and *The Sympathizer* (#90) by Viet Thanh Nguyen. As for the whole of the *New York Times* list, there is an interesting insight in the introduction that sums up the major themes included in the selections:

The best of the best, Nos. 1 through 10, are linked for sure by sensitive intelligence and achieved ambition. But other connections can be made. Most are historical novels or narrative histories, as if readers, weary of the vacuity and smash-and-grab belligerence that dominate much of American political and social discourse, desired either to escape or to gaze backward, to better understand how we arrived here.<sup>9</sup>

The library list and awards are well-represented on the list. Of the 100 titles, only 14 were not included in any list including the Pulitzer and National Book Award.

There were a few titles that didn't make the list that surprised me as during their year of publication they were quite popular: *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014) by Elizabeth Kolbert, *Just Mercy* (2014) by Bryan Stevenson, *How We Fight for Our Lives* (2019) by Saeed Jones, and *A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance* (2021) by Hanif Abdurraqib. This is not meant as a criticism of the list but rather an opportunity: as an RA librarian, connections and recommendations can originate with a great list or with titles remembered but not mentioned in an award.

The *New York Times* offered its readers a chance to respond to the most important book selections with a survey to choose their own titles. "Readers Pick Their 100 Best Books of the 21st Century" was offered in the same format: readers entered their favorite ten titles, and the results were posted online on July 18, 2024. Below is a table representing the number of titles mentioned by various library sources. We omitted the Pulitzer and National Book Award from this table, and LibraryReads mentions were added to the tabulations.

While the numbers are similar between the experts and the readers' choice list, it is interesting and telling that the *New York Times* 100 Best Books list included only 40 titles of the readers' choice list. Barbara Kingsolver's Pulitzer Prize winning *Demon Copperhead* (2022) tops the readers' list although it only appeared in a Library Reads selection, and *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) was number 2 on the list. Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* came in at number eight. Reader participation also presented some youthful choices for the list with *The Hunger Games* (2008)

**Table 2.** Readers' choice best 100 titles listed in other awards or lists

	<b>Notable Books Council</b>	<b>Carnegie Medal Winner or Finalist</b>	<b>Booklist Editors' Choice</b>	<b>Library Journal Best Books</b>	<b>Library Reads Selection</b>	<b>NYT 100 Best Books</b>
<b>No. of Titles</b>	49	9*	28	35	24**	40

\*Since 2014

\*\*Since September 2013

by Suzanne Collins and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) by J. K. Rowling landing at numbers 56 and 73, respectively. The readers' choices were also more recent in publication: 38 titles were published before 2010 on the *New York Times* top 100 list as opposed to only 27 on the readers' choice list. Of the titles on the lists published 2020 or later, the *New York Times* top 100 contained only ten titles while the Readers' Choice list included 24 titles. All in all, The Readers' choice list skews a bit more popular and recent as compared to the *New York Times* 100 Best and the library lists are consistent to both lists in recognizing both critical and popular favorites.

Readers' advisory librarians provide connections and recommendations to readers on variety of topics and reading interests. No one is an expert on all genres so it is important to build a knowledge base and strategies to find the books that readers will enjoy. "Best of" lists and book awards are building blocks for superior readers' advisory service. NoveList Plus is a great resource for locating readalikes, finding inspiration for book displays and other materials, and exploring topics that are of interest to readers. If available, take the time to browse *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and other trade journals on a regular basis. Participate in the LibraryReads website ([www.libraryreads.org](http://www.libraryreads.org)) and contribute your favorite titles to their monthly voting. Using all of the tools available will allow you to provide consistent service to readers who will reward you by returning for more recommendations.

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## References

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2. "Book Submission FAQs, Guidelines and Requirements," The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.pulitzer.org/page/books-submission-faq-guidelines-and-requirements>.
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4. "About the Andrew Carnegie Medals," American Library Association, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.ala.org/carnegie-medals/about>.
5. Garner, "The 100 Best Books of the 21st Century," 13.
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7. Garner, 13.
8. Garner, 39.
9. Garner, 5.