Readers' Advisory
Craig Clark, Col. Ed.

The State of Readers Advisory

A Discussion

Readers' Advisory (RA) is a library industry and educational term that is not known to most folks outside of the library world. Even within our profession, the mention of readers' advisory conjures both micro and macro level interpretations. Creating booklists and displays = RA services, conducting patron interviews and matching books with people = RA, participating in continuing education programs, understanding appeal factors and maximizing the use of curated databases such as NoveList = RA. In 2005, Joyce Sarick's noted in her work *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library, 3rd edition, 2005* that "librarians today find themselves in the midst of a readers' advisory renaissance" (p. 7). Thirty years ago, RUSA/Codes established a readers' advisory committee, and since then, "the committee has presented programs on readers' advisory at each annual conference and published two bibliographies of readers' advisory resources as well as a study of readers' advisory education" (p. 7). I was curious as to the state of RA today and the possibilities for the future, so I sent out an email questionnaire to some librarians across the country to gather their opinions on the matter. Special thank you to Rebecca Vnuk, Executive Director of LibraryReads for connecting me with some of her colleagues.

Two Notes:

1. Individuals who responded are identified by their initials at the end of each entry. Their names and positions are listed at the end of the article.
2. Answers are the own words of the respondents; they have been edited only for brevity and clarity.

Question #1: How you view readers advisory services today?

Many of the readers to whom I speak get a lot of their reading suggestions from social media, online book "influencers," and friends. I have met people who go to Amazon and search for a title to see what that algorithm serves up. While some libraries have dedicated readers services staff, there are many libraries in which anyone at a service desk or in the stacks will be called upon to provide readers advisory. There is also more use of social media, websites, and online resources to provide passive readers advisory. (LD)

With the rise of social media communities like BookTok or Bookstagram, many patrons come in with a list of books they want to read, but because they're often the newest, most popular, in-demand books, we don't have them on the shelf, so it's even more imperative than ever to be ready to be ready to offer readalikes, or other books by the same authors. With this kind of RA, you must be quick on your feet and convince them that there are other books they will enjoy based on the titles they came in asking for. Today's RA professional needs to understand that it's no longer only about titles, but that we must

be well-informed about different platform/media options. A patron may exclusively read downloadable e-books or want to know about tht audiobooks that Spotify recently added. We should be ready to ascertain what kind of book their looking for and then start from there. (MJ)

I think that RA is an essential service that enables the library to make connections with its community of readers/viewers/listeners, and to build relationships. I increasingly think that our primary work as librarians should be thought of less transactionally and more as relational. By providing readers suggestions for stories that support and inform their lives, we are building up our communities. Helen Haines noted in 1945 that books have the power to "enlighten prejudices, to enlarge understanding of vital issues, to strengthen public acceptance and practice of cooperation," (Helen E. Haines, "Library Leadership," CLA Bulletin 7 (Sept. 1945): 10. I cannot think of more important work that connecting people with story. (BT)

RA services weren't taught when I went to library school because the debate between "giving people what they want vs. giving people what they SHOULD want" had been decided in favor of giving people what they want . . . In the small branch where I first started, what we were really doing was giving patrons what they wanted and helping them to find books they wanted to read. On the one hand we've come a long way and on the other hand RA services can still feel like a bit of a dirty secret and there's still some judgmentalism around the edges regarding what patrons do want. Also, the world has changed. People who could be regular patrons, the avid readers, are getting their reading recommendations elsewhere because, ***while we as librarians are very good at doing the job of matching people to books, we're considerably less good at promoting the fact that we're good at matching people to books***. (MH)

I think readers advisory services today are as vital as they've ever been. We can see through engagement on social media that people are looking for books to connect with, to make sense of the world, and to use as a temporary escape. (DMJ)

It's important to join readers where they are -if everyone is getting suggestions on BookTok, RA librarians should join the space. (SH)

RA is a core service of the 21st century Public Library. I say it often that if we do not train RA skills with Staff then why spend so much on collections. RA is the link between the patron, the staff, and the collection and results in serendipity and joy when the right material falls into the right hands at the right time. There is a tendency for Readers' Advisory to be seen as a nice skill to have and not a needed skill. . . . In the same way that we train people how to handle reference questions we must train people on how to handle suggesting materials, just because you read does not mean you have an innate skill to do RA. (LD)

Personally, I view RA Services as a vital part of the public library's future. The public is enamored with the ability of Amazon, Netflix, Google, and other computer/AI services to predict what book, movie, television show, or podcast they will enjoy next. I think libraries by and large have done a bad job of educating the public that we have trained and educated ourselves to provide this kind of personalized service. . . . We need to embrace our ability to provide readers advisory service as wholeheartedly as we ever embraced our ability to answer reference questions. Readers Advisory is also part of being "information professionals"—with just as important information and just as much professionalism. (KT)

It's more holistic now since RA considers a range of formats, including audiobooks (which adds the element of narration preferences). Plus, there are connections to make to movies, TV shows, and even games! (MY)

Locally, I think over the years we've built a system that really is now centered on readers' advisory internally. We made it a central training focus, and the center of our programming and services. It has served to build relationships with individuals and community partners where we are both starting and sparking book conversations that can go in a lot of positive directions. (JT)

Question #2: Where do you see RA services in the future?

Libraries have an opportunity to become the source where readers go for book suggestions and information. Passive and especially online readers advisory resources will be increased. More libraries will invest in insuring that all staff are trained in readers advisory, regardless of job title. Continued emphasis on eBooks and audiobooks with more integration between online readers advisory resources and digital collections. There will also be more attention paid to helping readers by using what NoveList calls appeal factors but are also referred to as catnip, vibes, etc—those tropes, tone, types of characters that people seek out. They are frequently used to describe genre fiction but more readers are using them to describe what they are seeking. (LD)

With the proliferation of social media accounts promoting books, we library professionals should view this as an opportunity to provide what social media can't: interactive and personalized recommendations. One of my most successful programs recently was the no-book book club, which consisted of participants talking about the books they've read recently. It went so well because patrons were learning about books from another person in front of them that they could have a conversation with, rather than the 1-way communication style inherent to social RA. . . . Now and in the future, we need to let the community know that we are trained on RA that it's a service that's free and available to them. (MJ)

I think that for RA to succeed, we need to see further connections between theory and practice. I would love to see more folks in the LIS world reaching out to practitioners, and vice versa, to look at how we can continue to improve and expand our services. Again, I think that moving away from transactional thinking to thinking about building relationships is key here. (BT)

I'd LOVE to see a librarian takeover of BookTok, Bookstagram and other social media sites. While a takeover is unlikely, an increased, more significant and better known (and respected and even sought after) presence is possible . . . ALA marketing its awards to the general book buying and reading audience—and a place for Booklist, Library Journal and Kirkus to do the same with their 'Best Books' lists as well. Authors I know personally have told me that reviews in the 'library trade' publications, particularly starred reviews, represent real money for them... Turning the ALA book awards lists into similar engines—for them but also for libraries as part of the book ecosystem, would be a win-win if we could figure out how to grab that tiger by the (long) tail. (MH)

RA will remain a core service for libraries, but I see it becoming more passive than active. Fewer and fewer folks come up to the desk and ask for book recommendations. They're getting them through articles and lists, which librarians have always created. The one active space I see where RA librarians can really push into and build momentum is video content . . . I also found that matching books to movies and TV shows can help boost circulation, especially for backlist titles. Which brings me to my next point, focusing on promoting backlist titles is going to be more important than ever. The shiny new book that everyone wants is never going to be available at the precise moment a patron wants it, so having backlist titles on lists, in videos, on display, right in front of patrons will be paramount for continued RA success. (MJ)

I wouldn't give up any of the traditional ways we reach readers, but we need to find more ways to engage readers of all ages. I think there's room for additional focus on older adults, teens, and younger fiction readers. We could also expand to cover more nonfiction suggestions for all ages. (SH)

RA is one of the ways that we future-proof the public's perception of Public Libraries. In the day and age of social media and lives dictated by algorithms the human touch of a Public Library staffer providing a custom material suggestion is unique. Algorithms as they exist today and into the near future do not have the capacity to grasp the humanness of emotional interactions with media. People are not always very good at describing what they like or don't like about a piece of media and a search box won't prompt them with further deepening questions the way a trained library staffer can. Libraries put the humanness back for people who have been conditioned to believe that a search result will provide them answers to everything. (LUD)

In large part, I see us needing to reclaim the service from algorithms based on purchasing. I don't think purchasing will ever be able to reflect the actual truth of what materials people enjoy. We can be the human contact for many people that lead them to their next great media experience. At the same time, I think some readers advisors will also be creating, enhancing, and improving AI resources to provide RA services. Our jobs have always been about organizing information and about making connections between seemingly random pieces of information. If that talent can be automated into a tool, it will make our jobs easier and recommendations more accessible to everyone. (KT)

I think that people (including library staff) may be tempted to lean on AI for RA services, but I don't think that's a great answer. At least it shouldn't be the only answer, and we shouldn't ignore the development of our RA skills just because AI is available. It might be a useful tool among other tools, and I still appreciate the idiosyncrasy of human readers and recommendations from practicing librarians. And I think many patrons enjoy the interaction based on a love of books and reading. (MY)

I think that for us, at least it needs to continue to grow and adapt. I feel like there's just such an overwhelming volume of material coming out between major publishing, indie, self-pub, and AI, as well as such a variety of needs among readers, and a book influencer culture that feels way too homogenous. I think having RA trained library staff who are paying attention to as much as possible and recognizing the gaps in our training or awareness is important to help connect readers with their needs. (JT)

Question #3: What are the most important skills in effective RA services?

The ability to really listen and focus on what the reader is saying rather than on what we wish they were saying. You also need to be able to ask clarifying questions to narrow down what they will like. But don't be afraid to offer suggestions out of fear that they won't like something. Give a reader several suggestions and let them try them out! (LD)

Reference Interview—knowing how to do one well . . .
    Customer service—A librarian should be able to keep the interaction conversational. It's also key to not make this a one-off interaction, but to encourage the patron to let you know if they liked or didn't like the book... This is part of relationship building which is foundational in library services.
    Humility—acknowledging that you don't and can't know all books and knowing what tools can help you. . . . Being able to keep up with the publishing world, trade journals, etc.
    Respecting all genres is paramount—know who the popular authors and books are across all genres so I can be a well-rounded librarian who's able to provide knowledgeable and enthusiastic RA service to all. (MJ)

A desire to read widely and to listen carefully. To put aside your own interests and focus on those of the reader. An interest in building relationships with readers. (BT)

 Active listening skills and the ability to set one's own predilections and judgments aside in service of helping the patron to either figure out and/or articulate and/or feel safe in describing what they want. . . . I'd also add a willingness to say "I don't know but I'll find out," a sentence which sounds easy but is often surprisingly difficult. (ML)

Listening, asking for more information on what appealed to the reader, and not taking it personally when a patron doesn't want any of your suggestions. (SH)

Active listening, empathy, and a heavy dash of curiosity are what make the best Readers' Advisors. When engaging with a patron, you must be able to be open to and non-judgmental about whatever they want to discuss with you and curious as you probe them further for explanation and searchable terms. You must be able to say "I can help you with that" even if you have never heard of the item and curious enough to want to explore why they liked or didn't like the item. (LUD)

Being non-judgmental. . . . I wish RA librarians would fully embrace the idea of "Give them what they want." We don't need to change or improve anyone. We should feed their book addictions, guilty pleasures, and current mood readings. It doesn't matter if the current best seller is well written or not. (KT)

Being patron-focused as with any effective library services. Listening well, asking good questions, identifying elements that are important to the reader's experience. Staying abreast of publishing trends and reading widely (at least sampling a bit of each genre). Knowing what resources are available (e.g., Novelist, LibraryReads). Finding ways to market this service so that patrons know we're here for them and happy to help them find their next good read. (MY)

A key skill that I try to build up in our staff is to actively listen or read depending on how we're taking in a request for aid--whether it is form-based or with a person in front of us. What I want to get away from is the person who's aggressive about their favorite books without listening to what a person is saying. Beyond that, it's recognizing that even with our favorite tools we must know how to use them. We're in an age where we have a lot of interesting tools, but we must use them correctly. It isn't just an automatic. (JT)

Conclusion

I would like to thank all those that took the time to answer the questions. It is clear from the responses that librarians view RA as an integral part of library services that moves beyond the simple book recommendation. I hope this article will spur some conversations in Readers' Advisory circles and prompt libraries to look toward the future to determine best practices regarding RA and customer service in general.

Participants

(LD) Lila Denning, MA, MLIS, Librarian III, Acquisitions Coordinator, St. Petersburg (FL) Library System, President Barack Obama Main Library

(MJ) Migdalia Jimenez, MLIS, Branch Manager, West Loop Branch, Chicago

(BT) Barry Trott, *RUSQ* Editor, Adult Services Consultant, the Library of Virginia, Richmond

(MH) Marlene Harris, Reading Reality.net

(DMJ) Dontaná McPherson-Joseph, MLIS, Collection Management Librarian, Oak Park (IL) Public Library

(SH) Stacey Hayman, MLS, Outreach Coordinator, Rocky River (OH) Public Library

(LUD) Lucy Donnelly, Readers' Services Specialist, Kansas City (MO) Public Library

(KT) Karen Toonen, Collection Services Manager, Naperville (IL) Public Library

(MY) Michelle Young, Branch Manager, Waimea Public Library, Kauai, Hawaii

(JT) Jessica Trotter, Collection Development Specialist, Capital Area District Libraries, Administration, Lansing, Michigan