

Readers' Advisory

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Inclusion as the Norm

The Power of Diverse Book Displays

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Displaying books in libraries is an essential part of providing readers advisory. Effective displays allow patrons to notice and connect with titles in a library's collection without direct interaction with staff. Most of those who enter a library do not ask for help; they search for titles on their own. A book display will reach more patrons than library workers could, especially given all the tasks unrelated to readers advisory that most have assigned to them. Items placed on display are often discovered by a patron who comes in looking for something else entirely. "A book exhibit consisting of a small group of books and a descriptive sign is one of the most effective ways to promote and highlight parts of the fiction collection."¹

This is true not only of fiction but of all parts of a library's collection. As a marketing tool, displays deliver a way to draw attention to titles that have not received the publicity or attention that bestselling books have. A title that has been in multiple magazine articles or everywhere on social media does not require the help of public libraries through book displays. The reality is that most of those books are checked out with wait lists. Book displays, as smaller, curated collections, are easier to navigate than shelves of titles. They provide a chance to introduce patrons to diverse titles simply as part of a theme or genre without adding any other context while also providing a way to minimize the conflicts that, unfortunately, many library workers are experiencing, while still placing a spotlight on those books. Lynn Lobash of the New York Public Library has stated, "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."² She recommends that library workers start with their collection as they build a display, rather than with a theme or props. This approach will focus attention on the library's collection as the primary driver for a display. Beginning with the titles in a collection that do not have long wait lists or have not been checked out recently is often a better starting point than selecting a theme and rigidly attempting to match titles to that theme. Unfortunately, titles that have not received the attention they deserve

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from book journals and reviewers are often from diverse authors. Every library's collection includes titles by a wide variety of authors, and all the books in the collection should potentially be included on a display.

Reminding library workers of the need to include diverse books in their passive readers advisory efforts helps to reinforce the need to broaden knowledge of a library's collection and to include titles that are outside of the very popular books that are constantly mentioned. Readers Advisory expert Becky Spratford states that "When you go out of your way to make sure as many identities and experiences are reflected in every single display or list you make, you are 1. showing members of your community that their identity matters and 2. you are providing great titles which will allow your readers to enjoy a book that might take them to a new place or allow them to see something they thought they knew from a new perspective."³ Highlighting the titles that diverse authors have produced, with diverse characters, and which present a window into another's experience is an important task for libraries. Programs, marketing efforts, and passive readers advisory should be used toward that effort. It's important to recognize that using multiple approaches will allow library workers to get those books in the hands of patrons who might not otherwise check out a particular title. These unmediated interactions with a book allow for someone to take a chance on a new-to-them author without hearing anything from staff that could create a barrier to them taking that chance.

For those library workers who work in areas where activist pressure adds anxiety to collection promotional efforts, a regular practice of adding great books by diverse authors to every display is a way to promote those titles among others just as great reads. This creates an opportunity by which "we can allow patrons to learn from diverse characters, authors, and settings while also finding commonalities in human experiences. They might learn to see their own experiences through a different lens. Similarly, books can disrupt and challenge ideas about diversity through multifaceted and intersecting identities, settings, cultural contexts, and histories."⁴ This opening of their perspective does not require a sign, which focuses on the authors' identity. Reading the books will create a chance to learn and recognize shared experiences. Spratford dryly notes that using words that include terms associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion in a sign could lead to negative comments when the same display without those words would generate none of those comments.⁵ Libraries who face scrutiny and outrage due to current political trends can focus on the individual titles and promoting them as potential great reads, potentially interrupting whatever narrative a reader had about diverse titles by allowing those readers to discover them through the low pressure and more subtle tactic of inclusion in a book display.

Diverse books have always existed, and library staff can be the path by which patrons discover them. "Windows, mirrors, and doors are still important and will always be important, but it's time to take the next step and recognize that books written by diverse authors, featuring diverse characters, are for anyone, for everyone, all the time" is how Robin Bradford, collection development librarian at Pierce County (Wash.) Library System states it.⁶ Celebrating cultural heritage and history months such as Black History Month or Women's History Month are important, but the titles that would be promoted then deserve year-round attention. They should not be suggested to only Black or female patrons. A great book is for anyone. The next step after including a regular display that celebrates heritage months is to include them in every display and list.

"Diversity is not a genre" is a phrase that has been repeated over and over. In his essay "Being Indian Is Not a Superpower," author Stephen Graham Jones notes that "Once I started publishing novels, I quickly found that, at book events, I'd get questions that focused on Indian culture and life and history and 'tragedy' (always the tragedy) more than on the story itself."⁷ Jones reminds

librarians that focusing on identity alone may cause the story an author is telling to get lost behind preconceptions of what that identity means. There are great stories in libraries, including many by authors who are from marginalized communities. A book display with mysteries by a wide variety of authors with an expansive range of experiences will broaden the choices for those readers familiar with the genre, introducing them to mysteries they missed. Looking away from identity alone also encourages the inclusion of a wider variety of stories from every community. Contemporary poet Scott Woods has created lists of picture books, ignoring the common themes of boycotts, buses, and basketball and are instead about black children doing what "all children do: play, make up stories, learn life lessons, and dream."⁸ This can also be carried forth into adult titles as diverse characters can fall in love, solve mysteries, have adventures, and live complex lives in books.

There are other concerns about focusing on the diversity over the books. For example, Dr Elizabeth Hendrick points out: "Essentially, if we consciously begin crafting a special collection for queer kids but we only suggest the books in that collection to the kids who specifically request books about queer kids, and don't offer them as valid reading material to kids who have not made inquiries about books with queer kids, we're participating in the process of marginalization, indirectly or not. For queerness to become an open and accepted part of society it must be normalized, and this includes adding books that have queer protagonists to your regular slate of books that you would recommend to any kid."⁹ To use the example mentioned above, mysteries by queer authors should be recommended to all mystery fans through displays and other passive readers advisory tools, not only to those seeking books by queer authors or with queer characters. Queer people are part of everyday life, readers' local communities, as well as the wider world. Those books should be recommended to any reader, even outside of June.

This marginalization creates a separation between books by diverse authors and others. It centers a white, straight, Christian perspective as what is in "normal" books while making diverse books more of a niche interest, to be read by members of those communities and on special months. These books are not interesting or valuable because their authors and characters are diverse.¹⁰ They need to be added to the displays, lists, and suggestions that are made to readers interested in a particular genre or topic. Moving who is centered in the culture of reading that is created in a library, allowing those who are marginalized to take center stage, even if a sign does not declare their identity, is actively promoting a culture of anti-racism. This active promotion does not require signage identifying the author's characteristics to be actively anti-racist. These books are books that should be treated as titles to be potentially enjoyed by any reader. Deliberately developing a regular practice of adding diverse titles to all displays and lists both increase staff knowledge of those titles, creating more opportunities for them to be included in staff recommendations.

A feature like staff recommendations is a perfect place for a library to introduce patrons to diverse books. This is especially true if the staff member has built up trust as someone who regularly makes great suggestions in a particular genre or subject area. When they recommend a book, it will carry additional weight with patrons who share their tastes. Staff should be encouraged to broaden their own reading and include titles that are not widely promoted or discussed to make that display a genuine area of discovery for readers. Short descriptions that identify why that staff member enjoyed a particular title could draw in a reader with similar interests. Diverse titles regularly appearing in places like staff recommendations creates a culture of reading that has depth and breadth. If a library staff reads diversely and broadly, they will make diverse suggestions to patrons through active and passive readers advisory efforts. The American Library Association (ALA) has an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights on their website under the title "Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights." About belonging, ALA states:

"Libraries do not talk about this aspect of the ALA Library Bill of Rights enough. Including a wide variety of books in our book displays as part of everyday practice will help to encourage patrons and staff to see books by diverse authors as part of the collection and part of the books that we recommend."¹¹ Belonging is a message that libraries can send both directly through inclusion in their mission statements and indirectly through the titles they promote. Through books, readers can see themselves and their community as well as see others as having common thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Although activists may still pressure library boards and stakeholders to remove particular titles that have been targeted by organizations intent on purging collections of any book they deem objectionable, libraries can promote reading broadly and diversely by using book displays to promote those titles to their patrons as part of a rich collection. Libraries should be intent on encouraging everyone to feel as if they both belong in the library and have an opportunity to see other experiences in the books they read. Focusing on regular inclusion in all collection promotion efforts, even without signs indicating that a display is inclusive or devoted to diversity, can allow diverse books to reach an audience that would not seek them out on their own. This creates an opportunity for library workers, in regions where pressure from local politicians and outside interest groups occurs, to put diverse books in the spotlight in a way that minimizes the chance they could be targeted.

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