A House Divided?
Two Views on Genre Separation

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In the spring of 2006, a spirited debate on the merits of separating out library fiction collections by genre was held on the Fiction_L discussion list (subscribe at www.webrary.org/rs/FLmenu.html). Interesting points were made on both sides of the issue, and while no firm conclusions were reached, the discussion exemplified the thought and passion that readers' advisors bring to their work. This issue's column features two articles that present each of the sides in the ongoing question of how to best present a collection that will best serve the reading interests of library users. Looking at the concerns about separating out genre collections is Barry Trott. He is Adult Services Director at the Williamsburg (Va.) Regional Library, past chair of the RUSA CODES Readers' Advisory Committee, and series editor for Libraries Unlimited's Read On . . . series.

Writing on the value of genre separation is Vicki Novak, who earned her MLS from the University of Arizona and has worked for fifteen years at the Maricopa County Library District in Phoenix. She wrote the chapter, "The Story's the Thing: Narrative Nonfiction for Recreational Reading" for *Nonfiction Readers' Advisory,* published by Libraries Unlimited in 2004, edited by Robert Burgin. Trott and Novak are both active participants in the discussion of readers' advisory (RA) theory and practice on the Fiction_L discussion list—*Editor*

A recent *New Yorker* **cartoon depicts a bookstore clerk talking to two men. The clerk is saying,** "We no longer shelve gay fiction separately. It's been assimilated."[1] It has been an accepted truth in readers' advisory (RA) that separating out genres from the rest of the fiction collection is the best mechanism for serving readers who come into our libraries. Sharon Baker, in *The Responsive Public Library: How to Develop and Market a Winning Collection*, gives an excellent summary of the research done on genre separation and shelving.[2] Her work makes a compelling case for separating out fiction genres in library collections. However, as increasing numbers of authors are crossing genres from book to book and publishing titles that encompass multiple genres in a single work, practitioners of RA may consider rethinking how they use genre classification in their practice. It may be that our goal of serving genre fiction readers has unintended consequences for all our readers and for the practice of RA.

There are several issues to consider when looking at whether to interfile fiction collections or to separate out the various genres. Among these are problems in defining genre, the stigmatization of genres, time and space issues, and the role of the readers' advisor. In all of these cases, it is worth

examining the effect of separating out genres from the rest of the fiction collection.

DEFINING GENRES

There is no question that genre provides a way to describe and access certain types of writing. Even Ursula K. Le Guin, who is no fan of the use of genre, notes, "The concept of genre is a valid one. We need a method for sorting out and defining varieties of narrative fiction, and genre gives us a tool to begin the job."[3] As readers' advisors, we need to understand genre, for it is in analyzing genres that we come to understand the stylistic elements that authors use that will appeal to readers—of fantasy, Westerns, romances, mysteries, and so on. Here the idea of genre is useful because it defines a set of precepts that describe a certain style of writing. This knowledge will then allow us as readers' advisors to connect readers to books that they will enjoy. In fact, it is an understanding of what the appeals of a particular genre are that will allow us to make connections between books and authors that may be separated by genre classification.

For instance, a classic appeal of the Western genre is the story of the lone hero, struggling to right an imbalance created by a monolithic evil (be it a land-hungry cattle baron, a rapacious outlaw, or the impersonal and unfeeling machinations of banks and railroads). A readers' advisor who understands that this is a common thread in many stories in the Western genre will certainly be able to direct a reader to the next Louis L'Amour or Stephen Bly novel. But at the same time, the readers' advisor may also suggest that this reader try the legal thrillers of John Grisham or Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan stories, both of which have similar elements of the lone hero and his faceless nemesis.

There are, however, problems that arise as we try to define genre and place titles accordingly. As noted above, many authors are writing books that could feasibly be placed in a variety of genres. Is Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* a work of science fiction? After all, its most prominent plot feature is time travel. Should it be classified as romance? This is certainly how many reader reviews on Amazon.com described the book.[4] Or is the book literary fiction, telling a story of family and relationships in lyrical and elegant prose? Logically, this book could be placed in any one of these genres, and in libraries that separate out genre fiction, a reader could possibly expect to find this title in one of three places, depending on how the catalogers chose to identify the book. *The Time Traveler's Wife* is by no means the only recent title that exemplifies this problem. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake,* Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*—both of which have strong science fiction elements—and many other titles have crossed genre boundaries.

THE GENRE STIGMA

Where libraries choose to place titles like those mentioned above points out a potential problem that can arise in the use

of genre classification. There are many readers who use genre classification not so much as a tool for selection of titles but rather as a means of rejecting titles they do not wish to read. These are the readers that all readers' advisors have encountered, who say things like "I never read science fiction" or "Fantasy stories are for teenagers." In the case of such books as *The Sparrow* or *The Time Traveler's Wife,* putting these titles in a genre collection will mean that readers who automatically reject those genres will rarely come across these books. At the same time, putting one of these titles in the general fiction collection may mean that readers who limit their browsing to genre collections might never come across a title that they would otherwise enjoy.

In her essay "Genre: A Word Only a Frenchman Could Love," Le Guin notes that it is when genre begins to be used to make value judgments about a particular work that the system leads to "arbitrary hierarchies" that promote "ignorance and arrogance."[5] We have made great strides in RA to get away from the notion that genre books are inferior; that if a book of horror or romance is "well written" (whatever that means) then it must not be a real genre book; and our efforts towards this end have had some measure of success. Most readers' advisors subscribe, at least in theory, to Rosenberg's First Law of Reading: "Never apologize for your reading tastes." Nevertheless, a quick look at any readers' forum on the Web will indicate that many readers still think of genre fiction as something less than real literature.

The danger that arises in separating out genre fiction in libraries is that this separation can contribute to the continued notion that there is a hierarchy of writing and that genre fiction belongs lower on the scale than literary fiction. Too often, genre fiction collections that are separated out are not clearly identified as such, and represent the arcana of the library's holdings, where only the true devotees venture. While these true devotees may be delighted to have a section devoted to them, such breaking down of the collection into specializations makes it less accessible to those readers who "don't read horror" or "never pick up a Western."

As Wendell Berry points out, one of the dangers of specialization is that it allows you to ignore everything that is not in your specialty.[6] When fiction collections are separated out into specialized subcollections, we are trying to create a library that is easy for readers of genre fiction to use. But at the same time, we may also be creating a library in which readers can simply ignore parts of the collection because they are labeled science fiction, fantasy, or mystery. As readers' advisors, this should give us pause because our goal is to make connections between readers and books and not to artificially wall off parts of the collection.

SPACE ISSUES

Another series of concerns that arises with collections that are arranged by genre relates to the use of library space. With increasing numbers of writers moving from genre to genre with each book they write, genre separation in the fiction collection means that readers who are looking for works by a par-

ticular author are going to have to look in multiple locations to find books that they want to read. This concern becomes particularly pressing given the data cited by Baker et al. indicating that readers consistently choose titles by author.[7]

With an author such as Walter Mosley, it is possible that a reader would have to look in science fiction, general fiction, and mystery fiction in order to locate all of his titles (unless, of course they were all grouped together in an African American fiction section, which raises another set of issues). Similarly, a reader looking for the works of Doris Lessing would need to look in science fiction and literary fiction. The alternative would be simply to put Lessing's science fiction works in with her literary works, which makes a negative statement about science fiction writing.

An often mentioned solution to this problem of collocation of an author's works is to purchase multiple copies of these titles and place them in all the appropriate sections of the collections. Two problems arise here. First, few libraries have the financial resources to purchase multiple copies of all the titles that would be required. Second, few libraries have the shelf space available to house substantial additional copies of titles. This second concern also applies to the suggestion that book dummies be used to direct readers to other copies of an author's works that are located in a separate collection.

TIME ISSUES

A common thread in discussions of genre placement is the necessity of reviewing the cataloging of the fiction collection to ensure that materials are in the proper subcollection. A recent discussion on the Fiction_L list included the following post: "We find similar slip-ups all the time, when catalogers work from subject rather than other things more pertinent to a genre, so that we are continually pulling books like, say, Ira Sher's *Gentlemen of Space,* a lovely mainstream novel that just happens to involve astronauts, out of science fiction."[8]

A frequent concern of readers' advisors is the lack of time to practice their craft. If a result of separating out genre collections is that we are spending significant amounts of time rechecking the work of the cataloging staff and then sending back titles to be recataloged, consider interfiling the collections and spending more time out in the stacks working with the readers, connecting them to the titles that they are seeking. We would better serve our readers by devoting more of our time to providing assistance to them through direct service and building useful guides to our collections than by spending the time trying to decide where a particular book fits in the collection. The increasing prevalence of outsourced cataloging that is not under the direct control of the library makes this an even more pressing issue.

Much of the literature that supports the separation of genres notes that breaking the collection down into smaller units makes it easier for the reader to browse and locate titles. Baker cites a study by Spiller in 1980 that indicated "[M]ost fiction readers try to expand their list of favorite authors by browsing for preferred genres."[9] But in reality, this sort of browsing is not that simple. Sheldrick Ross discusses an in-

terview with a reader who has been frustrated by her inability to locate new horror authors who can recreate the pleasure she found in the writings of Anne Rice and Stephen King.[10] This reader was frustrated that the titles she was picking up in the library did not have the fast pace and immediacy of her preferred authors (there was no indication if her library separated or interfiled genre fiction).

In this case, as in many others, the reader was looking for titles not so much by genre as by appeal (fast-paced) and by author (Rice and King). Sending this reader over to the horror collection would not necessarily address her frustrations, as the books in a horror section would range from the fast-moving King-like titles to slower-paced titles that the reader would not enjoy. In this case, as in many others, a successful conclusion to this reader's library visit would more likely be made by a direct encounter with a readers' advisor. The reader's browsing habits were not helping her find what she wanted. Here is where the readers' advisor's time would be best spent in seeking out readers and in developing useful displays and guides to the collection. Read-alike lists placed in the stacks near the appropriate authors, ongoing displays of genre fiction titles, and direct assistance to readers in the stacks will best serve both the readers and the library.

THE ROLE OF THE READERS' ADVISOR

Finally, the question of whether to separate out genre collections deals in part with the view of the role of the readers' advisor. Among many librarians working in RA, there seems to be a reluctance to suggest titles to readers that go beyond the reader's genre interests. This may be in part a reaction to the early days of the RA movement, where the goal was to raise the standards of the reader from novels to the heights of nonfiction.[11] Openness to all sorts of reading interests is a laudable goal and has immensely improved RA service.

But if we are only about helping readers find the next book that is just like the one they finished, it is unlikely we would suggest a Louis L'Amour title to a John Grisham fan. We would be afraid that we are pushing the reader out of the legal thriller comfort zone. However, if what the reader really wants is a book that features a lone hero struggling against a monolithic evil, then L'Amour might be a great selection. It does not really require a readers' advisor to point a reader to the mystery or Western section of the library. It does require a readers' advisor to make those connections between titles and across categories. The readers' advisor does not know best but can make connections that the reader had not thought of. If we do not assume some skill or authority in what we do, why should anyone come to us for assistance?

Helen Haines wrote,

Librarianship ought to mean personal fellowship with literature—catholicity, tolerance, receptivity toward the new, familiarity with those older tideways from which fresh currents rise, diverge, and flow endlessly through time; and always zest in an infinite adventure of exploration and discovery.[12]

If these are hallmarks of readers' advisors, we should not be afraid to work with our readers to explore those tideways with which they may not be as familiar. To avoid doing so out of fear that we are dragging readers to places they do not want to go seems to be a grave mistake for the profession.—*Barry Trott*

GENRE SEPARATION: AN INVALUABLE RA TOOL

When you look at a public library fiction collection, what do you see? As a librarian, you probably see neat rows of titles, all arranged alphabetically by author with the spines even with the front of the shelf. Our need for order and easy access is satisfied by having all fiction together, without separate genre collections. But when patrons look at a library fiction collection, they may see the same neat rows of titles as impenetrable. To browsers without a specific book in mind, those orderly rows have as much appeal as brick walls.

THE BOOK CART EFFECT

Library browsers are desperate to avoid those brick walls; they commonly gravitate toward any smaller chunk of the collection they can find. Many of them never venture past the new book section, because they can browse the whole section in a short time. Others swarm around carts of recently returned books because someone else thought they were good enough to check out. Librarians weeding books that haven't been checked out in years may even find that the act of just putting them on a cart makes them more desirable. It is daunting to browse a large collection of interfiled fiction; where do you start? Patrons will always prefer to browse a smaller, more manageable set of books rather than wandering the aisles aimlessly and pulling out random books. They really just want to find an easier way into the collection.

CONSTRUCT ENTRY POINTS

Because of this, our goal as librarians should be to construct as many entry points into the collection as possible. Traditional RA service provides one entry point in which we talk to patrons directly, recommend authors and titles, and show them connections between books that they may not have considered. There is no substitute for offering this service to our patrons; it graciously ushers them through the front door of the collection. However, other indirect methods of RA service allow patrons to explore on their own, entering through the familiar creaky screen door in the back and choosing their own intriguing passageways into the collection. We encourage this exploration by providing catalog records with numerous fiction subject headings matching the terms that readers most commonly use. We provide paper and online book displays and booklists in areas where patrons are most likely to discover them along the way. We display some books face out to allow for serendipitous discovery. Most of us would agree

that these are necessary tools in an ideal fiction collection. If we do these, it's also logical for us to do everything we can to make it easier for genre readers to browse. If at all possible, libraries should devote time and space to providing genre sections for the genres most in demand in the community.

SAVE THE TIME OF THE READER OR SAVE THE TIME OF THE LIBRARY?

One argument against providing separate genre sections is that authors who write in various genres will be split among several collections. For instance, Kate Wilhelm's books will probably be in the science fiction, mystery, and general fiction sections. However, fans of a particular author will either already be aware that (1) an author writes in different genres, or (2) they can easily use the catalog to locate all of the author's titles. They may already be accustomed to looking in different places if the library has separate paperback and hardcover sections. On the other hand, genre browsers in an interfiled fiction collection are left to scan the shelves for genre stickers. This is much more time consuming than it is to locate one author in various genre collections.

Another argument against genre sections is that it is time consuming for the library to determine which titles should go in which genre section and that, in many cases, a book could go in more than one section. It's true that the choices are not easy to make, and wrong decisions may happen at times. However, genre readers are looking for guidance from us. They expect us to make those kinds of judgments even if it is an imperfect science. Our expertise as readers' advisors should naturally extend to decisions made about genre definitions, which should be drawn from the average genre reader's expectation of what will be included in the section. Whose time should we be saving? S. R. Ranganathan asked us to "save the time of the reader."[13] It really boils down to this: we separate genre collections mainly for the convenience of the patrons, while we interfile fiction mainly for the convenience of the library.

PRESERVE INDEPENDENCE

We do not like to think of our patrons going it alone without direct contact with us, but the fact is that we live in a society that values independence. You probably have many patrons who happily use your library without ever asking for RA or reference assistance. We have all had experiences in stores where salespeople are annoyingly ingratiating, even pushy. Sometimes our patrons just want to browse in peace. We grant that independence to genre readers when we respect them enough to give them their own areas for easy browsing. Then, if they decide to venture outside of their preferred genre, they can do it on their own terms and timetable. Patrons whose reading preferences lean toward general fiction or literary fiction will also appreciate having their own section to browse. This is not lit-fic snobbery, but a realistic acknowledgement of different reading tastes. In either case,

we need to make it as easy as possible for patrons to remain independent if they prefer it but also as comfortable as possible to receive assistance when necessary.

COMPARING A LIBRARY AND A BOOKSTORE

Library users tend to be familiar with the layout of bookstores, so it is valuable to take a look at how bookstores address this issue. I decided to investigate a public library and a bookstore that I had never visited before. I tried to imagine how a typical reader would react to each location. I went in with the idea that I would look for typical fiction genres, including mystery, science fiction, romance, Western, and fantasy. In addition, I would check to see if any other fiction was in its own section. And for comparison, I would check to see how the library and bookstore treat two nonfiction "genres"—true crime and travelogues.

The Library

A new 15,000-square-foot branch in a suburban setting, this library has separate genre sections for romance, mystery, science fiction, and Westerns. Each book is labeled on the spine with a genre sticker that simply states the unabbreviated name of the genre. There are no pictures on the stickers, such as a skull for mysteries or a heart for romance; I found this refreshingly simple and clear. The genres are filed separately in both the new and regular book sections. The regular book section includes small genre signs on the shelf ends. This system of labeling the books and the sides of the shelves is very clean looking, without a lot of clutter. However, it is harder to tell from a distance where to find the genre sections. This library does use some hanging signs, but the genre collection is not labeled in this way. There is also a small space for book displays.

What about nonfiction genres? True-crime and travelogues are easy for librarians to find by browsing in the appropriate Dewey numbers. But for patrons who aren't familiar with library classification, these are much harder to locate than in a bookstore. There are no signs for the genres, and searching the catalog gives mixed results. Searching for the keywords "true crime" brings up titles not through a subject heading, but by publisher series titles that have "true crime" in them. More results can be had by searching for "murder" and "case studies," but not many patrons would think to search this way. Someone who is unfamiliar with the Dewey Decimal System would either need to know some titles and authors or ask a librarian for help. For those who are reluctant to ask for help, this may keep them from finding this section.

Travelogues, also called "travel writing" or "travel narratives," do not fare much better. Searching the catalog by keyword for "travelogues" only returns twenty-five items. "Travel writing" brings up 295 matches, but is still not a complete list and is mixed with titles on unrelated topics. "Travel narratives" brings up 117 matches. Again, a patron unfamiliar with the section will either need to know titles and authors or ask for help.

My overall impression of the library is that it is very well organized and not cluttered. Libraries excel in offering standardized classification so that regular library users easily find their way around, even if they visit a different library. However, compared to a bookstore, it is more difficult to go in without a specific type of book in mind and still browse effectively. I spent the most time browsing the new book section, because it was a manageable size to look at. I also spent time browsing in the science fiction section. My entry points for the other parts of the collection required using the catalog, asking a librarian, or looking for a specific author.

The Bookstore

This 15,667-square-foot independent bookstore is located in a suburban area minutes away from a major university. It also sells gift items and shares space with a café. As an independent bookstore, its selection and sections appear to be tailored to community interests. There is a general fiction section, along with genre sections for science fiction and fantasy, mystery and thriller, horror, and classics. These are labeled with small stickers on the front of each shelf that were not immediately obvious, but once I noticed them, I easily found the other genres. There were separate paperback and hardcover sections for each genre, which could be confusing to a customer. Surprisingly, I did not see any romance or Western sections, but perhaps there is less interest in the community for those genres.

I also looked for the same nonfiction genres I sought out in the library. Travelogues were in the travel section, but were given their own spot labeled "travel literature." Some books were displayed face out, though all were kept alphabetical by author's last name. It seemed an ideal arrangement for fans of travel writing. True crime was harder to find; I had to ask for help in locating it. Inexplicably, it was within another section called popular culture. There may not be much of a demand for true crime, as there were only two shelves of the books.

My overall impression was that no space is wasted in creating inviting displays to draw in customers and entice them to buy. Bookstores are very browser-friendly, and a customer can go there with no specific titles or authors in mind and still find interesting possibilities. However, the signs, displays, and nonstandard shelving sizes can create visual cacophony and sensory overload.

What a Bookstore Can Teach a Library about Genres

Generally, bookstores are much easier to browse than libraries. This is because booksellers make it their business to know what readers want and which genres will be more easily found as separate sections. They also know that not everyone is shopping for a specific item, so stores are full of special displays. The independent bookstore I visited had displays of books for discussions, staff favorites, Book Sense bestsellers, and many others. Displayed books often had inserts with staff comments. Of course, the dark side of this is

that in large-chain bookstores, publishers pay top dollar for a spot in a display.[14] Libraries don't have profit pressure, but we should still strive to make our collections more intriguing, more browser-friendly, and more enticing by borrowing techniques from bookstores. Besides the typical fiction genres, we could even go so far as to pull out separate nonfiction genre sections.

CONCLUSION

We should do everything we can to provide the entry points into the collection that patrons are looking for. Genre sections save time in browsing and allow our patrons to be independent if they choose to do so. While bookstores have different goals from libraries, we can borrow some of their techniques to more effectively arrange our collections for maximum use. However, some libraries lack space and staff enough to provide separate genre sections. To compensate, we should be all the more vigilant about using spine label genre stickers, offering paper and online reading lists, rotating genre book displays, using shelf-talker signs to direct patrons to similar authors, and promoting our RA services. And if the time comes that we have an opportunity to rethink interfiling, what is wrong with giving genre readers what they want? Sure, it means more work for the library and decisions to make that are not cut-and-dried. But isn't it worth it to match more books with more readers?

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