
RA Training

"Getting Started with Readers' Advisory"

Lynne Welch, Guest Columnist

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When we think of small town libraries, we often visualize the serene setting of familiar faces strolling in and out of the front door of the library, an old historical building, or the lounging of a library cat or two napping in the sun. What we don't often think of is that the majority of libraries are not city libraries, but small libraries dotting the landscapes in every state and province. In each of these libraries we have bustling activity where innovative ideas are being implemented and stories of successful readers' services practices are just waiting to be shared. Lynne Welch, an active and innovative readers' advisor, happily agreed to share her library's activities and ideas with us. How lucky for all of us because what she shares is an enthusiastic article bulging with ideas for the beginning and experienced readers' advisor in both large and small libraries.—*Editor*

As a new MLS graduate in 1997 starting to work in a library for the first time, I had no training in readers' advisory and my employer, a very small public library in a rural area, had no official program in place. Actually, one of my charges in the newly created reference librarian position was to establish, train staff to provide, and promote a readers' advisory service for all ages.

Yes, Ohio libraries at that time had some advantages other places may not have offered, but that gap has steadily dwindled over the past fifteen years. As we hire new staff, we must train them with fewer resources and a constantly increasing demand for the services we can provide. How do we do it? By a combination of chutzpah and dogged determination, mostly! Of course, we do rely on several tricks that I will discuss throughout this article.

GET TO KNOW YOUR COLLECTION!

Getting to know your collection is the first step. Whether you shelve by genre or alphabetically within format, spend some hands-on time with the collection. See what looks well loved, and whether you own complete, up-to-date series. Mentally you are establishing an inventory—perhaps 50 percent of the fiction collection is devoted to cozy mysteries and much of the rest is inspirational. Whatever the makeup of your particular library's collection, you need to know what you have and whether most of it is being used or the same items circulate repeatedly.

By learning your collection, you also will instinctively begin to correlate between and across genres. For example, we have found that many of the readers who enjoy Prairie

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Romances and Frontier Historicals also are willing to at least consider Westerns, especially the classics (Louis L'Amour, Zane Grey, Max Brand, and so on) and those by Elmer Kelton. Knowledge of appeal factors such as setting, tone, theme, or subject matter also will grow. Consider what appeal factors are common between two or more genres and how you can use that to expand what you offer your readership. Use your knowledge of the whole collection to satisfy the reader standing in front of you; a reader who has just discovered the title he came to check out has a long waiting list.

Don't limit yourself in matters of format, either. Many readers may never have considered the Large Print section. If a popular title is available in Large Print and there is a long waiting list for the regular version, it can be worthwhile to convince your reader that he is welcome to the Large Print copy. Most readers are very considerate and they may not want to deprive a vision-challenged person of the pleasure of reading, but if the title is on the shelf it is equally available to all. I have made more than one convert to the readability of Large Print for tired eyes! Audio and digital formats also can be offered as appropriate; we frequently recommend that younger readers check out both the audio and print version of an assigned title, especially if they are reluctant readers or prefer to learn aurally rather than visually. We have discovered their enjoyment of reading can grow if they don't have to focus on mastering the process as well as the content.

If interlibrary loan is an option, it can also exponentially increase your ability to satisfy your readership. We belong to a statewide resource-sharing group and also will search other local catalogs in an effort to satisfy the person who may be willing to travel to adjoining areas to get the book sooner. We also try to offer a similar title that is currently available on our shelves whenever possible in conjunction with this offer. As a result, the reader leaves the library with something in hand as well as the potential for her satisfied request.

The process of "getting to know the collection" also includes becoming familiar with the readers' advisory resources available to you. Perhaps other staff members have created a "Good Books Book." In an article written for *RUSQ*, Kaite Mediatore Stover describes it as a binder "full of reading lists, award winners, local newspaper reviews of books, booklists from other libraries, *Library Journal's* Reader's Shelf columns, *Booklist's* Readalike features, bestseller lists, or anything suitable."¹

If you are lucky, you might discover that someone (or several someones, depending on the size of your library) has compiled a list of favorite websites to consult for various types of questions that recur in your library. If not, some ready-made compilations are available online, often because of various library-school projects. They are sometimes called "link farms," and they corral all sorts of useful information: review sites as well as bookmarks, booklists, publishers' reading guides, and more.²

Maybe you have access to online commercial readers' advisory databases, such as the Gale Books and Authors product, the Readers Advisor Online database, or EBSCOhost/Novelist. Equally valuable are the print versions of how-to manuals and discussions of genre. Here are just a few of the possibilities:

- Joyce Saricks' seminal *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* and her *Guide to Genre Fiction*³
- Diana Tixier Herald's Genreflecting series⁴
- Jessica E. Moyer's and Kaite Mediatore Stover's *Readers Advisory Handbook*⁵
- Kent (Michigan) District Library's What Do I Read Next? (<http://ww2.kdl.org/libcat/WhatsNextNEW.asp>)⁶
- the many useful titles published by Gale, Libraries Unlimited, and ALA Editions.

An Internet search using "readers advisor resources" will yield many more titles in this field. Some of these may be shelved in staff-only areas. Others may not even be cataloged. Ask around and you might be surprised at what you find!

GET TO KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Maybe those well-worn titles that exhibit such satisfying circulation statistics are only going out because your readers do not have, or can't find, other titles more to their tastes. Try to informally engage them during their visit, introducing yourself and your purpose and asking them what sort of reading experience they prefer and whether they are finding the materials they seek on your shelves.

We periodically conduct formal surveys of visitors and nonvisitors (the latter through the mail to residents of our service district) and find them very valuable. I also find it valuable to engage in ongoing casual conversations with people—while I'm checking them out at the front desk or just by walking up to them in the stacks and asking whether they would like some help.

Remember, readers' advisory is always about the reader, not about you. Please do not fall into the trap of enthusiastically recommending something you love to everyone you meet without carefully considering whether it's relevant to their tastes! Find out what they enjoy, do your best to match their preferences, and give them a selection of several titles on hand to consider. Encourage them to come back and let you know what they thought. Then, *walk away*.

This allows readers to look over the items without an audience and make up their minds as to whether they want to continue looking or are satisfied with these suggestions. I always tell them that if they read the first page and it does not appeal, they should feel free to put it down immediately rather than lug it home. And if they do get it home and aren't enjoying it, they should close the book and bring it back, and we'll try again. Many readers have had it drummed into them from an early age that once started, a book must always

be finished. While that may be true for assignments, readers should be encouraged to spend their precious leisure time doing something they enjoy. As librarians, we're in a position to do that, and it can build a bond with an otherwise reserved person if we officially give them permission to stop reading books they aren't enjoying.

We also should bear in mind that readers' advisory is a continuing conversation, unlike a straightforward reference transaction, and there is no right answer. It is an art, rather than a science, and requires patience and willingness to experiment. From the beginning, I have encouraged people to follow up with me as to what they think of any book I have helped them select. Some of them, although initially hesitant, now regularly seek me out to share their opinions of books they have read, whether or not I helped them find those titles. As a result, I am more likely to keep their preferences in mind when ordering new items for the collection—a win/win situation for everyone, as the library adds titles that will be read and enjoyed. Additionally, our readers feel that we are taking their tastes into consideration when spending the tax dollars they have provided.

LEARN ABOUT YOUR COLLEAGUES ON STAFF AND ENLIST THEM TO HELP YOU PROVIDE EXEMPLARY SERVICE

Our library is very small and everyone on staff must be prepared to work the front desk as well as provide reference and readers' advisory services at any time. Each staff member also has additional responsibilities. However, whether in cataloging, processing, shelving, or other areas, we are always on-desk whenever we are scheduled to work. This can make it challenging to provide effective specialized services like readers' advisory, so we try to share informally as often as possible via a front-desk clipboard, as well as by creating indirect aids like booklists and shelftalkers and offering readers' advisory skill refreshers and training whenever it is deemed appropriate through staff meetings and circulated printouts.

Whether or not this is the case in your library, I strongly encourage you to consider your colleagues on staff as a primary resource. The catalogers see the new arrivals on collection development orders and can be effective partners in helping you create readalikes and themed lists as well as offering suggestions for enhancing the cataloging record. Circulation staff are familiar with what is being checked out on a regular basis and can alert you to trends and your community's preferred genres, preparing for specific requests to be repeated over and over. Shelves have perhaps the best view of what is circulating and can be your allies in promoting specific titles, genres, and underutilized resources by means of displays and shelving choices.

As an example, when I started working at the library, we did not catalog paperbacks. In 1999, I attended a Librarians' Day program presented by the Romance Writers of America in which Dr. Alison Scott of the Browne Popular Culture Library

of the Bowling Green (Ohio) State University Popular Cultures Library, Joyce Saricks of Downers Grove (Illinois) Public Library, and Kristin Ramsdell of California State University/East Bay presented compelling arguments for cataloging every item held by a library. Armed with that information, I was able to convince my director to support full cataloging of popular fiction held in paperback format, with series links and subject headings.

Later, as staff discovered that more information in the on-line catalog made it easier for them to help people, we added other innovations. One such was the 411 line (we call it the "Information Please" link, after the telephone service) with readers' advisory information in a searchable series field. For example, Science Fiction Romance is not currently recognized as a valid subject heading by the Library of Congress, but it's popular in our area, so we made a 411 series entry "RA: If you like Science Fiction Romance . . ." and inserted that field into the cataloging records of popular authors who write in the genre. We have also used it to prepare for the annual summer reading program and as a quickly generated list for topics and themes we expect to become very popular. For a more complete description of this process, please see Laurel Tarulli's July 25, 2010, blog entry "Success Story: In-House RA Reading Lists in the Library Catalogue."⁷

Your IT staff, marketing department, and webmaster are other potential allies in the continuing effort to provide exemplary service. We regularly post a PDF list of new adult fiction to our webserver with a link prominently displayed on the library's homepage. We know that it is being used because if we do not post one promptly each month, people call to ask about it! We have also started creating QR codes linked to booklists, with the intent of posting them on our shelftalkers. Many more people in our area have smartphones than have computers with Internet access, and this is another way we hope to serve them without a huge outlay of expensive marketing materials. Anyone on staff can create a reading list. Once created, we upload it to the server as a PDF and use Kaywa's free QR code generator (<http://qrcode.kaywa.com>), print the graphic, and display it. We also are working on using these as a ready reference for our Outreach staff; when they are out making deliveries and encounter a question, they can snap on a code to access the prepared list in specific, popular areas without carrying bulky paper lists.

Getting to know your colleagues' choice of reading matter can be invaluable preparation for those times when you are asked to recommend a title in an area where you are not as familiar. Nobody reads in every genre, but you can tap your colleagues for suggestions related to their areas of interest. I regularly ask one of our circulation staff for help with narrative nonfiction, especially readable biographies, and another for suggestions on small-town sagas and stories centered on women's lives and relationships. At one staff meeting we played RA Bingo, but you can easily achieve the same result by going around to your colleagues individually. I've included a basic table to get you started (see table 1). Feel free to customize it for the genres popular with your library's

Table 1. Who Reads What?

Graphic Novels	Suspense & Thrillers	Contemporary Romance	Inspirational Fiction	Fantasy
Travel Narratives	Literary Fiction	Classics	Cozy Mystery	Horror
Science Fiction	Westerns	Cooking	Gentle Reads	True Crime
Poetry	Men's Adventure	Humor	Biography & Memoir	Historical Fiction
Self-Help & Motivational	Bestsellers	History / Micro	Natural History	Contemporary Issues

readers, using any word-processing program's table function. Learn who reads in those genres and enter their names in the appropriate areas. While you are at it, you may want to ask them for one or two gateway titles you can generally recommend for readers new to the genre, including yourself. But it is my firm conviction that *no useful purpose is served by forcing yourself to read extensively in a genre you don't enjoy!* Instead, practice your "Read a Book in 5 Minutes" (www.sjrlc.org/RAhandouts/5minutes.htm) skills on those gateway titles to give you a basic understanding of their appeal, and invite your coworkers to help you satisfy reader requests as they occur.

ENLIST ALLIES AT OTHER LIBRARIES

National and regional library associations offer face-to-face meetings, but you can network online as well, and it's free. This is where the chutzpah comes in—don't hesitate to introduce yourself, offer opinions, and ask questions on discussion lists or directly via email. Most of us are easy to track down and happy to share what we know. Lots of readers' advisors participate on the Fiction-L discussion list (www.webrary.org/RS/FLmenu.html), and many also contribute to their own library's blogs and other online resources. Fiction-L's archives also are very helpful in providing a searchable record of past discussions, trends, and booklists.

Do not hesitate to put your own spin on others' innovations, either. I have benefitted from many good ideas from my colleagues over the years, often long before I met them in person! Here are a couple to get you started:

- The Williamsburg Regional Library "Looking for a Good Book" reader profile form (www.wrl.org/books-and-reading/adults/looking-good-book) offers a comprehensive questionnaire to assist you in conducting the initial and follow-up interviews, including extensive vocabulary suggestions for describing appeal factors.
- Dorothy Broderick's and Mary K. Chelton's invaluable discussion, "How to Write a Readers Annotation," first published in YALSA, has been updated and made available online (www.sjrlc.org/RAhandouts/annotation.htm). Becoming comfortable with annotations pays incredible dividends in terms of both direct and indirect readers' advisory!

MONITOR CURRENT-AWARENESS WEBSITES

This one is self-explanatory. You do not need to spend much time on this, but bookmarking (or using the RSS feed option) and scanning some of these on a regular basis will pay significant dividends.

- Nora Rawlinson's *Early Word* blog (www.earlyword.com) provides current-awareness alerts of popular and forthcoming titles as well as periodically scheduled Galley Chats.
- Foreword Reviews (www.forewordreviews.com) is especially useful for independently published titles.
- *Library Journal* (<http://lj.libraryjournal.com>) offers skill-building articles as well as themed booklists.
- *Publishers Weekly's* PWxyz blog (<http://blogs.publishersweekly.com/blogs/PWxyz>) profiles developments in publishing, frequently with reference to their effect on libraries.
- The *Readers Advisor Online* blog (www.readersadvisoronline.com) offers a weekly rundown of forthcoming titles as well as bestseller lists.
- Shelf Awareness (www.shelf-awareness.com) offers email newsletters for readers as well as for bookstore and library staff; they profile new and forthcoming releases as well as developments in the publishing and bookseller industries.

DEVELOP AND REFINE YOUR READERS' ADVISORY SKILLS BY TAKING ADVANTAGE OF ANY TRAINING YOU CAN FIND

Although it is not always possible to attend professional conferences or workshops, many organizations such as ALA, Public Library Association (PLA), and regional groups post conference handouts to their websites after the event. These are freely available and constitute a good resource for tips, tricks, and innovative programming. Searching online using the engine of your choice for "readers advisory handouts" will offer numerous results.

In addition to paid content available via subscription, EBSCOhost/NoveList (www.ebscohost.com/novelist/novelist-special/subscribe-to-newsletters), *Booklist*, and *Library*

Journal all offer free readers' advisory training via newsletters. You can sign up from their websites. The Readers' Advisor Online website is based on Libraries Unlimited's print series, *Genreflecting*, and offers genre information as well as the weekly blog listed above. The Chicago-area Adult Reading Round Table (www.arrtreads.org) website offers genre studies, genre boot camps, booklists, training resources, and more.

Stephanie Bond is a very successful romance author who was originally a marketing executive. Her articles for booksellers (http://stephaniebond.com/booksellers_articles.html), especially her advertising strategies and hand-selling technique, are of immeasurable benefit to the librarian tasked with promoting the collection. I have been hand-selling, rather than book-talking, since I discovered this technique and it has been very effective. Plus, when used in conjunction with the "Read a Book in 5 Minutes" and annotation techniques referenced above, there's no need to spend valuable time preparing and memorizing book-talks on a limited number of titles; you can put the techniques to work while you are standing there with the reader looking for her next good read!

Genre-specific professional writers' organizations offer another ready resource for collection development as well as readers' advisory. These include the Horror Writers' Association, the Mystery Writers of America, Romance Writers of America, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and Western Writers of America.

Finally, consider signing up for author and publisher newsletters in genres popular at your library to serve as both publication alerts (so you remember to buy the next in a popular series) and as a free source of takeaways for your readers. Many authors employ publicists who generate fancy bookmarks with series information and annual lists of forthcoming titles. Others create these types of promotional materials themselves or receive them from their publisher. I use them to supplement our in-house displays; we insert them in books on the shelf and hand them out during the course of a readers' advisory transaction.

SHARE WHAT YOU KNOW!

Knowledge hoarded is knowledge lost. Be generous in sharing your discoveries and any tools you develop. It is up to you whether you post to your personal or library blog, participate in a librarians' discussion group or a professional journal, present at a conference, or just quietly share with your in-house colleagues.

We are all happy to learn something new and put it to good use in our own environments, and your suggestion may offer the solution to someone else's situation. A willingness to share sometimes pays unexpected dividends in terms of building your professional reputation as well. Our library received an Innovation Award Honorable Mention from OPLIN (the Ohio Public Library Information Network) because I encouraged other libraries using the same catalog vendor to work with NoveList on a particular enhancement.

Someone at the state level saw it, explored our catalog, and was impressed. That, coupled with our willingness to fully catalog popular genre paperbacks and a few other added-value projects, led to my being chosen as the Romance Writers of America's Librarian of the Year from among an extensive and highly qualified group of nominees. This, in turn, has led to collaborations with other readers' advisors on a variety of projects.

CONCLUSIONS

Librarians are a creative as well as a thrifty group. We are smart enough to find ways to work together, to take the best of our colleagues' innovations and customize them for our own use. Take advantage of some of the hints I have detailed above; search out and try others you think may address your own circumstances, and make it a point to serve your readers as best you can. I will leave you with a quote from an interview I did several years ago but which is still relevant today:

It's all about attitude. If you greet people enthusiastically and let them know you want to help them find stories that interest them—in whatever genre!—they will work with you and grow comfortable discussing their likes and dislikes with you. And when they ask for you by name to continue the conversation, that makes an impact on administration and colleagues. . . . Get to know your collection, and subscribe to discussion lists and email newsletters which discuss new and forthcoming releases so you can be aware of trends and the big names in the genre. Bookmarking websites for quick reference is helpful too. I put mine in a special "Readers' Advisory" folder so I can find them when I need them. Don't make a lack of money an excuse not to serve your public. There are lots of free resources out there if you look for them . . . , many of whom [author websites and other resources] will be happy to help you start publicizing your collection. Remember, you're giving them access to a wider audience than they can manage on their own from individual sales, so they benefit as well.⁸

References

1. Kaite Mediatore Stover "Working Without a Net: Readers' Advisory in the Small Public Library," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 122–25.
2. See, for example, the Readers Advisory Link Farm homepage, <http://readalike.org/ra.html>.
3. Joyce G. Saricks, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2005); Joyce G. Saricks, *Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2009).
4. Diana Tixier Herald and Wayne A. Wiegand, *Genreflecting: A Guide to Popular Reading Interests*, 6th ed. (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006).
5. Jessica E. Moyer and Kaite Mediatore Stover, eds. *Readers Advisory*

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Handbook (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010).

6. We have both print and online versions, but henceforth the print version will not be updated.
7. Laurel Tarulli, "Success Story: In-House RA Reading Lists in the Library Catalogue," *Cataloging Librarian* (blog), July 25, 2010, <http://laureltarulli.wordpress.com/2010/07/25/success-story-in-house-ra-reading-lists-in-the-library-catalogue>.
8. "An Interview with Lynne Welch: RWA's 2004 Librarian of the Year," *All About Romance*, accessed January 25, 2013, www.likesbooks.com/rwa2004librarian.html.