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# RA School

## *Learning from ILS Faculty*

### Interviewees:

**Mary Grace Flaherty**, Professor Emeritus, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Information and Library Science. **Lisa K Hussey**, Associate Professor, Simmons University, School of Library and Information Science. **Catherine Sheldrick Ross**, former FIMS Dean, Professor Emerita, University of Western Ontario, Faculty of Information and Media Studies. **Paulette Rothbauer**, Associate Professor, University of Western Ontario, Faculty of Information and Media Studies.

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Building upon our “eavesdropping” columns that invite groups of advisors to gather via email and discuss practice, philosophy, and methods, this issue invites us all back to school. Here four ILS faculty gather to consider the key principles of Readers’ Advisory (RA) and their philosophy of RA service. They also answer why RA is not taught more broadly and they, of course, have a book to share. Most centrally, in this wide-ranging conversation, their passion for the service and the importance they place upon the activity of reading shines through.—*Editors*

**T**hese interviews (which have been condensed and edited) reveal how ILS professors teach and frame RA. They explore how each engages with students to stress the most important relationships the library fosters, the community of readers and the interaction between reader and book. Their answers are illuminating and reveal, at least from an ILS perspective, that the way we currently practice RA might have migrated too far from the reader, stressing too much the apparatus of RA (objects such as booklists, displays, and read-alikes), which they discuss only in passing.

It is worth remembering that when Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown first began working on their appeal construct, they began framing appeal from a readerly perspective. It was soon clear to both that learning appeal would be much easier if it was book-centered rather than reader-centered, but the early days of contemporary RA never wandered far from the reader. “Tell us,” they said to the patrons they practiced with, “tell us what you enjoy.” Those answers built appeal.

Since then, if RA has become an active, engaged, and at times, harried undertaking, these faculty members remind us to slow it down, to be mindful of the conversation.

By shifting our focus, even just for a short while, from what we absolutely need to have in our wheelhouse in order to work with readers, to those readers themselves, these ILS professors offer us space to appreciate that much of what we do as advisors is to build small micro-climates of reading, patron-by-patron. Make the reader the heart of the process they tell us, and the rest will unfold.—*Neal Wyatt*

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### OFFICE HOURS: MEET THE PROFESSORS

#### Tell us about your life as a reader

*Mary Grace Flaherty*: Teaching the RA seminar, which requires reading a book from a different genre weekly,

reminded me how much I enjoy reading as a leisure activity. In recent years, my reading has focused on scholarly literature and keeping up with the news—what a joy to have a curated list of books to choose from, and then analyze and discuss with a class of engaged readers.

*Lisa Hussey:* My own experience has really helped me to be more respectful because when I was younger my reading interests (sci-fi/fantasy) were not always treated as “good” reading. I really try to stress the idea that “good” reading is whatever someone is reading. A year ago, I had a student ask me how I got so much knowledge about books and how they could do it. I told them that I was older and that it took time. Since then, I’ve tried to also be as encouraging as possible that this takes time.

*Catherine Sheldrick Ross:* As a reader, I am eclectic and omnivorous, but from my research with avid readers I know that some other readers are very selective and discriminating. It is very helpful for readers’ advisors to understand the enormous variety in the way people choose, read, experience, and value books. In my RA class, one assignment required each student to conduct an interview with the most avid reader they could recruit, their goal being to understand the interviewee’s individual reading experience from childhood to the present. The students transcribed their anonymized interviews and made them available for the rest of the class to read and reflect upon. A very common response from students was amazement that these interviewed readers were so different from the student’s own reading experience and so different from each other. Reading differing accounts from different readers helped students in the class sharpen their awareness of their own reading preferences and practices. For example, one person may enjoy rereading favorite authors and books, but another may say there are so many wonderful new books out there that they don’t want to miss out on a new experience by rereading. One reader facing a problematic situation may want to gain perspective on the problem by reading about characters facing the same situation, whereas another may want to escape their personal situation and live in a fictional world closer to the heart’s desire. Moreover, as we reflect on our own reading, we see not only how our reading differs from that of other people; we can see how our own reading differs from itself. It changes from year to year and even from day to day, depending on our age, our personal circumstances, and whatever else is happening in our lives.

*Paulette Rothbauer:* I have had a long, decades long apprenticeship to reading and realize now, that even, in my early fifties, that I’m still discovering new things about how I read, what I like to read and when, and what it means to be a reader. I have read across genres, and I’ve learned that I can get pleasure from reading things like cookbooks and knitting manuals, reading that I considered more instrumental than my own understanding of my reading tastes would

have allowed me to believe. I also go long stretches without reading much more than news and magazines. I’ve learned to allow myself to be the kind of reader that I am when I am that kind of reader, to judge myself less, and to just go with it. This influences the way I teach about readers, reading, and RA, as it allows me to bring my own lived experience of being a less active reader, a less committed reader, a reader who is hard to pin down, into our learning, making the absence of judgement about reading habits and reading tastes a ruling principle.

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## START WITH THE READER. LISTEN TO THE READER.

### What are the key principles of RA in your seminars?

*Lisa Hussey:* I teach RA in both my Information Sources and Services (reference) and a separate RA course. In both cases, I focus on the importance of listening to the user, showing respect for the request, and being open to learning. To me, one of the most important principles of RA is respecting the reader and taking the time to listen to provide the best service possible.

*Paulette Rothbauer:* I focus on three key principles:

1. Readers (and nonreaders) direct the readers’ advisory transaction: so that they determine what counts as reading, and what counts as a good read to them at the moment of the transaction
2. RA encompasses a set of skills (listed below), specialised knowledge, and competencies that can be learned and can be taught, and that require ongoing development, research, resources, and support
3. Public libraries and library workers are key to the promotion of reading, the production of readers, and of the sustainability of reading cultures.

The key elements of the RA skill set include:

1. Knowledge of materials: encompasses collections, publishing news and trends, awareness of different formats and media, reading lists, bestseller lists, genres, social media, RA tools, library catalogues, OverDrive, Hoopla, and more.
2. Knowledge of how and why people engage with those materials: Why do people read? (or watch? or listen to?) What motivates them to make reading selections? To recommend materials to others? What does reading mean to readers? What does reading mean for our communities?
3. Knowledge of how to engage people about their reading interests, preferences, and needs: this encompasses RA skills like conducting an RA interview, or engaging in a

directed conversation with a patron about their reading/viewing/listening tastes, and needs. Specific skills are: how to bracket one's own preferences and judgements, how to elicit information from a patron that matches our systems, the ways in which we can provide access (e.g., using appeal factors in NoveList, using subject headings for our library catalogues), and how to encourage browsing across all of our systems.

*Catherine Sheldrick Ross:* The overarching principle that I have stressed in courses, workshops, and publications on RA is to start first with the reader and with what the reader says about the type of reading experience desired. There is no place in current readers' advisory policy or practice for the older idea that there is a hierarchy of reading materials and that it is the librarian's job to push the reader up the reading ladder. The "best book" (or film or other format) for an individual is the one that fits that person's interests, preferences, and situation at a particular time. It's the one that the reader will actually read and enjoy. Therefore, the key relationship is between reader and book. What's at issue in RA work is not the quality of the book on its own, apart from any reader, but the quality of the reading transaction between the reader and the book. Louise Rosenblatt's classic text *Literature as Exploration* (1938/1995), neglected at its time of first publication and then rediscovered, has persuasively made the case for a transactional model of reading. Rosenblatt has argued that readers play a key role in making meaning. The black marks on the page are the same for everyone, but the meanings readers construct depend on their age, their experience and competence as readers, their familiarity with literary conventions, their life experience, and their current state of mind, mood, interests, and preoccupations. Hence the need for readers' advisors to talk to readers.

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### THE READER CENTERS THE TRANSACTION

#### What is your philosophy toward the provision of RA?

*Mary Grace Flaherty:* RA is a cornerstone of library services, and should be treated and considered as such. Having worked as the director of a small, rural public library, I witnessed repeatedly the power of connecting with and engaging patrons through RA. Whether it was through direct interaction, on-going displays dedicated to a certain genre or staff picks, and/or book discussion groups, RA was surely one of our most important and popular services.

*Lisa Hussey:* RA is an information need, just like any other question. It should be treated with the same respect and effort that is given to any other question or information need. I really don't make distinctions between information needs. I try hard, both in RA and in my information

services course, to stress that any question deserves respect. My students, I think, are very tired of me constantly telling them that it's not about them, it's about the person in front of them. It doesn't matter what they think of the question. What matters is that they help the person fulfill the information need.

*Paulette Rothbauer:* RA services are built upon a foundation that is profoundly relational. They pivot around the relationships between readers and books and other reading materials. Readers also develop reader identities that shift and change depending on what is going on in their lives, so that the provision of RA is always about so much more than connecting a reader with a book.

The identity of being a reader is one of the most stable identities that we can inhabit across our lives. I see this in my interviews with older adults—one of the most harrowing losses for them has to do with the dissolving ability to read, and to make their own choices about what they want to read and when they want to read it. Despite all the ways they might describe themselves over their lifetimes, one of the most enduring positions that they are proud to take up is that of reader.

And I saw this too in my interviews with teens and young adults: they proudly declare that they are readers even when they are still exploring other aspects of their identities. And so, when I say that RA is about so much more than connecting a reader with a book, I think what I really mean is that because RA does connect readers to books, it has the capacity to connect readers with critical aspects of their own identities, to connect readers to their own sense of who they are and who they might become.

*Catherine Sheldrick Ross:* My philosophy of RA provision follows from the recognition that reading is a transaction where both elements in the relationship are important: the book and the reader. The more readers' advisors know about popular genres and their appeals, the better, which means they should use the professional RA tools that are increasingly available. But this book knowledge and familiarity with professional tools can be drawn on appropriately only *after* the readers' advisor finds out, from talking to the reader, what kind of reading experience is wanted. A well-conducted readers' advisory interview is needed to uncover elements that a reader generally enjoys in a satisfying book (e.g., eccentric, quirky characters or world-building or a deeply realized sense of place or edge-of-your-seat suspense). But it can also be used to find out from readers something about their current situation and mood. For example, a reader who normally looks for densely written historical fiction along the lines of *Wolf Hall* might say that during a current stressful period that what she wants is a life-affirming, upbeat book guaranteed not to blindsides her with unexpected and harrowing disasters. In a nutshell, the reader gets to choose.

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## LEARN THE COLLECTION

### How do our collections support the conversation?

*Mary Grace Flaherty:* In the Seminar in Popular Materials we examine the place of popular materials within society and within libraries. We cover the different types of genres and sub-genres (including background, history, key books, current awareness, prizes, awards, and specific libraries with outstanding collections), their corresponding appeal factors, how they might overlap and/or have changed over time, and special issues or challenges. We also practice conducting RA interviews and presenting book talks so that students learn how to help connect readers to the literature they wish to read.

*Lisa Hussey:* It is important to have an understanding of genres on multiple levels, such as knowing the “big” genres, knowing some of the seminal authors and works, recognizing the sub-genres, and crossover works. RA requires an openness to learning about all reading, not just what you like, willingness to ask questions of others, taking the time to do some work like reading reviews, looking over new books, and being outside of your comfort zone, but still being as helpful as possible.

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## LISTEN. UNDERSTAND. PAIR.

### What is the end goal of RA?

*Paulette Rothbauer:* To support and sustain an active culture of reading in the world, to support reading as an unique social good.

*Catherine Sheldrick Ross:* The goal of RA should be to provide a reader-centered service that respects readers’ choices. The reader looking for a “good book” gets help in narrowing things down from an overwhelming number of possible materials to a much smaller set that could actually provide the type of experience that the reader wants. Effective readers’ advisors get readers talking about critical elements in books they have enjoyed in the past as well as about what kind of experience they are in the mood for reading right now. The job of the readers’ advisor is to understand enough about the individual reader’s current preferences to be able to select from the thousands and thousands of books available a manageable few that are likely to provide the experience that the reader wants.

*Mary Grace Flaherty:* To match a reader with a book that they will relish (or at the very least find engaging). By this I mean being able to tease out the appeal factors that resonate with a reader and recommending an item based on that interaction.

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## RA IS FOUNDATIONALLY IMPORTANT

### What do we all need to keep in mind?

*Catherine Sheldrick Ross:* Successful provision of RA needs to be recognized and celebrated as one of the library’s most important roles. An accumulating body of research is converging on the importance of voluntary leisure reading, or pleasure reading, in the making and sustaining of confident readers. Libraries need to toot their own horn more to let library users know that providing RA service and personal advice is something that they do and want to do. No one asks for a service if they don’t know it is available.

*Mary Grace Flaherty:* Appreciate the nuance of appeal factors and cross-over among genres.

*Lisa Hussey:* There is an effort that is part of good RA, doing things beyond just knowing the seminal authors in a genre, but learning more and being able to listen.

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## INSIDE THE ACADEMY

**It is the rare librarian who gets to take a focused RA class while earning her degree and even a unit on RA can be hard to find in a broader course. Once out of school, advisors feel this lack of education keenly and it is a common call from those practicing RA to increase RA education. So why is it not taught?**

*Paulette Rothbauer:* I think the logic of the argument that “libraries aren’t just about books anymore” has had a consequence for how ILS faculty and students imagine the work of public librarianship, and perhaps, too, school librarianship. There is probably a link here in terms of what gets prioritized for hiring in ILS programs, what gets prioritized for professional hiring, and what gets prioritized for large-scale research funding competitions.

*Lisa Hussey:* To begin with, it is not stressed as much as other aspects of the profession. It might be seen as part of ‘soft skills’ which are not always as valued. It may also be perceived that RA is covered by YA and Children’s LIS and isn’t needed in a more general sense or that a general RA course will have too much overlap. Also, it’s not as ‘sexy’ as topics like digital humanities or data mining.

*Mary Grace Flaherty:* Schedules don’t allow for it. Many ILS programs are thirty to thirty-six credits, which requires students to concentrate on requirements rather than electives. In addition, ILS programs train students for a wide variety of information settings where RA may not be readily applicable (e.g., in health sciences library settings). It is not a common primary research focus for many faculty members.

**A SUGGESTION FOR SELF-TRAINING**

**Given the lack of opportunity to take a focused RA class, what are some options for self-training?**

*Paulette Rothbauer:* Self-training could start with setting reading challenges for oneself: reading across genres, authors, formats, and could continue with engaging with reading and publishing communities whether in real-life or online. Committing to learning more about why people read might mean asking yourself questions about your own reading or asking your friends and family about theirs. And then, really listening to the answers about what reading means, what would help in terms of connecting people with what they want to read. [Editor's Note: the book *Reading Still Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community* by two of the contributors to this column, Catherine Sheldrick Ross and Paulette Rothbauer, (as well as Lynne McKechnie) is a key resource to consult when learning RA].

*Catherine Sheldrick Ross:* In a chapter on the RA interview in *Conducting the Reference Interview*, 3rd ed. (2019), I provide a role-playing exercise in which librarians in pairs practice their skills in finding out what the reader wants to read. The person who plays the role of the reader generates in advance some fairly detailed scenarios that profile different kinds of readers and different situations. The person who plays the role of the librarian has at hand a copy of a list, "Some Questions for Readers' Advisors," which provides a number of tested questions that perform specific functions in the interview, namely questions to get a general picture of reading interests; to determine current preferences; and to understand the reader's situation and what he or she wants from the book.

The reader starts off the role-played interview by saying, "Can you help me find some good books?" but provides additional details only as specifically prompted by questions by the librarian.

To find out what the reader means by "good books," the librarian picks and uses appropriate questions from the list, such as: "So that I can get a better idea of what you like, can you tell me about a book you've read recently and really enjoyed?" "What did you enjoy about that book?" "What would be an example of something you *don't* like and wouldn't want?" "What are you in the mood for today?" "What do you want to get from this book" and "What kind of reading experience are you looking for?" The librarian doesn't just rattle through a list of questions but listens carefully to the reader and asks questions that follow from what the reader has said. After the interview is completed, switch roles. After each role-play, the actors should discuss how they felt about the interview from their perspective and then invite comments or suggestions from observers, if any.

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**ON MY SHELF**

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**To close, each advisor has a book to share**

*Editor's Note:* These descriptions, both in their level of detail and their focus, reveal the result of a career spent thinking about reading and the reader. They illustrate what advisors might wish to model. These are readers who have a deep and thorough understanding of what reading means and offers in their lives, who understand appeal, and have realized and can articulate what they require from a book to meet their needs of a moment, and of a lifetime.

*Mary Grace Flaherty:* I recently picked up an advance reader's copy of *The Sweeney Sisters* by Lian Dolan at the PLA bi-annual conference. It was a highly enjoyable read about a trio of sisters from Connecticut, each with her own quirks and appeal. Having grown up in a household with seven sisters, I found the characters relatable and the family "drama" engaging. The coastal setting was appealing, and description of the summer seaside was well drawn.

*Lisa Hussey:* I recently read *Golden in Death*, the fiftieth book in J.D. Robb's In Death series. This is actually a series I started twice. The first time, I stopped after the fourth or fifth book. They seemed too formulaic for me and I was able to figure out the killer fairly easily. However, in preparing for a lot of travel over one summer, I decided to try again and ended up falling in love with the series. It does start out in a formulaic way, but after about the fifth book, the characters really develop and I was hooked. J.D. Robb does an amazing job of building a strong woman detective, Eve Dallas, who has a history of trauma, which she is always working through. This, more than anything, is what makes this series powerful to me. Almost against her will, Eve builds a life with her husband, creates a family of friends, which continually surprises her, and is always dealing with her past as she moves forward. It is one of the few cases I've seen where a trauma survivor is allowed to be both strong and still vulnerable. The In Death series is a good fit for anyone who enjoys good mysteries, romance, and a futuristic setting. And, if you start now, you have fifty books to work through until the next one comes out!

*Catherine Sheldrick Ross:* Recently I read and really enjoyed Elizabeth Strout's latest book *Olive, Again* (2019), in which the Burgess brothers and wives appear in one of the short stories, "Exiles." So now I am part way through Strout's novel *The Burgess Boys* (2013), which focuses on two very different brothers, Jim and Bob Burgess, who leave Shirley Falls, Maine for New York City. Early in the novel, the narrator remarks about one of the characters that she had "perhaps her first understanding of the prismatic quality of viewing

people.” For me, a key appeal is Strout’s ability to show her characters as seen from different perspectives, refracted through the eyes of different perceivers. In *The Burgess Boys*, there are multiple perspectives: things as seen by longtime Shirley Falls residents; by New Yorkers; and by Somalis who have come to Shirley Falls as migrants escaping from strife at home.

*Paulette Rothbauer:* Recently, I read Caroline Van Hemert’s memoir *The Sun is a Compass: A 4-000 Mile Journey into the Alaskan Wilds*. I loved it. It is a classic adventure story. The author and her partner travel from Bellingham, WA, through British Columbia and the Yukon, to Alaska. They travel by canoe, raft, hand-crafted rowboat, and by ski and on foot. While her narrative does provide reflections about her life (e.g., should she take that academic job in the city, should she start a family, how will she cope with her father’s Parkinson’s?) it is also a glorious recounting of the robust elements of the journey itself, in all its wild and natural splendour and with all of its dangers (bears! drowning! storms! stampeding caribou!). It is fast-paced, and action-packed, and the icing on the cake is that Van Hemert is also an ornithologist and her memoir includes snippets of information about migratory birds, and her specialization, black-capped chickadees. So for me, the appeal factors include genre (adventure memoirs, life stories of women); its descriptive and engaging writing style; the location/setting of Alaska and northern regions; as well as the subjects of wilderness adventuring, science, animal migration, and birds.

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## EDITOR’S NOTE

Catherine Sheldrick Ross died on September 11, 2021, just as this interview was in its final review for publication. Her death is an immeasurable loss to RA scholarship. Advisory

librarians relied not only upon her expertise in the field to expand their understanding and on her rigorous standards of work to set expectations to follow but also on her generous spirit and her excitement about sharing thoughts about readers and reading. Her passion and scholarship made our work both possible and better. “Finding without Seeking: What Readers Say about the Role of Pleasure-reading as a Source of Information,” “What We Know from Readers About the Experience of Reading,” and *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries and Community* (co-written with Lynne [E.F.] McKechnie and Paulette Rothbauer) are mainstays in the field.

It is not only on the subject of readers and reading where Ross’s contributions are critical. She led the way in reference studies as well. Of particular note to *RUSQ* readers, she earned the Reference Service Press Award four times for the most outstanding article published in *RQ/RUSQ*. Her winning articles are:

- “The Reference Interview: Why it Needs to be Used in Every (Well, Almost Every) Reference Transaction.”
- “So Has the Internet Changed Anything in Reference? The Library Visit Study, Phase 2.”
- “Negative Closure: Strategies and Counter-strategies in the Reference Interview.”
- “Flying a Light Aircraft: Reference Service Evaluation from a User’s Viewpoint.”

Catherine’s many colleagues will deeply miss her voice and guidance, expertise and generosity, sharp mind and love of books. We send her friends and family our deepest sympathy and thank her for all she has done for the fields we love. A century from now she will still be studied, and her work will still guide the way, so critical and significant is her research.