A Few Good Books
Using Contemporary Readers’ Advisory Strategies to Connect Readers with Books

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A Few Good Books takes a big-picture view of what the librarian or library school student needs to know to be an effective readers’ advisor. Complementing Joyce G. Saricks’s Readers’ Advisory in the Public Library (2005) and Jessica Moyers’ Research-Based Readers’ Advisory (2008), this book brings together in one convenient place a huge range of material. “Reading” is conceptualized in a broad sense to include an encounter with a work in any format—codex book, screen, audiobook—and to include a range of forms of engagement from skimming to deep reading.

Like the reference transaction, the readers’ advisory transaction is brief—often only a few minutes long. If done badly, the staff member responds to a request by saying something like, “Sorry, I don’t know much about science fiction/war stories/regency romances/splatterpunk/survivor stories. But maybe if you just browse over there, you will find something.” If done well, however, the outcome is a happy match between the user’s interests, mood, and reading competence and the “few good books” that the staff member suggests. The library user may have experienced the encounter as an interesting discussion about books and reading interests and may not be aware of the range of expertise needed by the library professional to bring about the successful outcome. This book provides a road map to concepts and sources in key areas that the readers’ advisor needs to know about: reading research and theory; types of books and genres of (mostly) fiction; communication with readers/library users; and new technological mediations.

Even experienced readers’ advisors (RAs) will find something new here, especially in the emphasis given to very current technological resources and trends. Stephanie Maatta pays special attention to the ways in which emerging technologies have changed almost every aspect of the RA process. Reading itself changes when it moves from codex book to screen and includes engagement with a variety of formats, including audiobooks and downloadable books. Communicating with library users changes in a world mediated by Web 2.0 applications. And to help with the problem of finding fiction books with similar appeal factors (never easy in a traditional catalog), librarians have new electronic tools, including resources such as LibraryThing.com, that work by capturing the way real readers
experience and categorize books. *A Few Good Books* provides a crash course on new technological mediations of RA work and a lot more besides.

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Preface

TO CONNECT OR DISCONNECT?

Imagine this: . . . It’s a hot, summer afternoon. You’re working at the reference desk when a patron eases up to you, and says . . .

Scenario 1

User: Hi! I’m really sorry to bother you, but can you recommend something good to read?
Librarian [smiling]: I just finished *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. It was wonderful. Everyone I know loves it.
User: Oh, well, I don’t really like books about cooking. What’s potato peel pie anyway?

Scenario 2

User: Hi! I’m really sorry to bother you, but can you recommend something good to read?
Librarian [smiling]: You’re looking for a book to read for enjoyment?
User [nodding in agreement]: Uh-huh. We’re going on vacation and I need something to read during our flights.
Librarian: Vacation. How lovely. So, to give me an idea about the kind of story you might like, can you tell me about a book you’ve read that you really enjoyed?
User: I just finished *My Lady Elizabeth*, and I thought it was really good. I think it’s by Alison Weir.
Librarian: What was it that you liked about it?
User: The characters. She made them seem so real. Well, I guess they were real at one time. But you really got to know Elizabeth. And the history from that time is just so fascinating. The author was good with details and describing everything so I could imagine being there. And all that political intrigue. It was set in England, and that’s where we’re going on vacation.
Librarian: And are there any types of books that you definitely don’t like?
User: Um, I tried some of those fantasy books that are supposed to be the Arthurian legends. Thought that might set the scene for some of our travels. Didn’t like them. I want my characters to really be real, you know? I don’t mind a little violence and sex, but I don’t like things to be, um, graphic.
Librarian: Okay. If we could find the perfect book for you today, what elements would it include?
User: You know, I think I would enjoy some more books about England. Real history so I can get into the right frame of mind. We’re going to tour the Tower of London and some of the castles.

Which of the previous two scenarios would you rather be prepared to offer to people who come into the library?

Readers’ advisory is a dynamic, popular service. While this traditional activity remains intact, it has also evolved with the development and implementation of robust digital and online resources. And the publishing industry has followed suit, publishing more books in more genres, available in more formats. It is impossible for readers and librarians alike to keep abreast of the bright array of books, authors, and resources.

PURPOSE

A Few Good Books: Using Contemporary Readers’ Advisory Strategies to Connect Readers with Books has been written to be the most current text on readers’ advisory, meeting the needs of a new generation of librarians and readers. It considers the evolution of library and information science and the emerging technologies that enhance and impact the profession. It also considers the changing variety of the readers in a multicultural society, from adult new readers to non-native speakers of English.

The overall intent is to provide a solid foundation in the theory and practice of readers’ advisory (RA) along with a comprehensive examination of the tools to meet the needs of the contemporary reader. The relationship between the reader’s advisor and reader is symbiotic, with each giving and taking in the transaction—understanding the reader’s needs, identifying resources for good recommendations, connecting the reader with the book, and ultimately taking what has been learned from the first reader and applying it to the next.

Throughout this book the word “contemporary” is used repeatedly. The purpose is not to reiterate the other excellent texts on readers’ advisory, but to explore the new technologies for meeting the needs of today’s readers and the ways in which they engage with the written word. “Contemporary” readers’ advisory strategies refer to current and ongoing developments in RA, especially those that are technologically mediated and that have grown out of both traditional services and innovative approaches. The focus of the book will be to provide the practitioner and the student with information on the latest develop-
ments in RA, rather than focusing attention on areas that are well addressed by other texts.

A Few Good Books: Using Contemporary Readers’ Advisory Strategies to Connect Readers with Books has been written to meet the following goals:

1. To introduce the librarian and graduate student to the nature of reading and the ways readers engage with books beyond the practice of reading
2. To introduce the librarian and library and information science graduate student to the dynamic world of readers’ advisory services; the readers’ advisor conversation; major readers’ advisor tools; general and genre fiction descriptions and suggested titles; and current and emerging trends
3. To serve as a comprehensive resource for librarians—a handy resource for finding common solutions to readers’ advisory questions
4. To provide the profession with a current overview of what readers’ advisory services encompasses in today’s technologically enhanced world

ORGANIZATION

A Few Good Books is divided into four discrete parts. Although each part can stand alone, many links between topics exist in different chapters. Parts I and II present the necessary foundational and introductory background for the study of readers, books, and readers’ advisory. For the reader who is anxious to delve into contemporary RA strategies immediately, Chapter 6, “Beyond the General Reference Interview” is an excellent starting point. Part III is the heart and soul of contemporary RA, including an emphasis on RA services that are mediated technologically and on a diverse, multicultural community of readers. Part IV concludes the text by considering many of the ancillary activities that enhance and heighten the reading experience and enable the librarian to remain current and knowledgeable about authors, books, and current trends.

Part I: On Readers and Reading

Humans were not born to read; it is a learned behavior that developed across millennia into a highly complex cognitive, social, cultural, and psychological behavior. To gain an understanding of the relationship between readers and books, and the art and practice of readers’ advisory, it becomes necessary to examine the historical and theoretical foundations of reading and how humans developed as readers. Not only did the act of reading evolve, but the book as a physical artifact and the ways in which we engage with reading evolved concurrently. It is impossible to discuss readers’ advisory without an understanding of what defines a reader and how the reader approaches the act of reading. It also is crucial to understand the evolution of reading to place readers’ advisory in context.
Chapter 1, “From Cuneiform to Kindle,” presents a discussion on the activity of reading from its earliest evidence in 4000 BC to reading in the multimedia world of the twenty-first century. More than being a recitation of history, it provides the touchstones of reading that shape and define contemporary readers.

Chapter 2, “History and Context of Readers’ Advisory in the Library,” turns to the activity of advising readers in the library as it has evolved over time. It considers the long-standing debate about the value of popular fiction and the evolving role of the readers’ advisor in the public library. It also considers who the RA librarian is and what he or she does. The chapter also examines the values and beliefs that formed RA services and allow them to flourish in our contemporary libraries.

Chapter 3, “The Role of the Reader and the Act of Reading,” is the culmination of Part I and an introduction to Part II. This chapter considers the definition of a reader and the practice of reading. It examines the social behavior we exhibit while reading, including shared reading and solitary pursuits. It also presents some of the theories that define or explore reading behavior.

Part II: Reaching the Contemporary Reader

The contemporary reader engages with reading in other ways than the act of reading a codex. With the range of options made available by Library 2.0 technologies and innovations, readers and librarians are able to engage with each other and with reading in many unique and exciting ways. Many readers seek out audiobooks and downloadable books to listen to during commutes to work and school. Younger generations of readers prefer reading online. And readers do not describe their reading preferences in traditional cataloging terms; by using resources such as LibraryThing.com, they describe books in ways that make sense to the reader, not the librarian. To this end, Part II includes the following chapters.

Chapter 4, “Tags, Clouds, and Participatory Readers’ Advisory Services,” begins to consider all of the Library 2.0 options for connecting with readers. Using Library 2.0 technologies invites the reader to participate in creating content and resources that are useful in meeting their needs and interests. Technology is dynamic and changes daily, but the intent of this chapter is to encourage readers’ advisory staff to explore the numerous options that will enhance the reading experience.

Chapter 5, “Reading Electronically through Sight and Sound,” takes a close look at the alternate formats for reading beyond the traditional print book. This chapter examines several of the digital options available for supporting the act of reading, including e-readers and audiobooks. Ultimately, Chapter 5 considers the conundrum of “What is a book?”
Part III: The Art and Science of Readers' Advisory

This portion of *A Few Good Books* comprises the heart and soul of the text. Part III is the perfect starting point for the librarian or student who is anxious to jump right into the topic of contemporary readers' advisory. The chapters focus on how to provide skilled readers' advisory for contemporary readers. Each of the listed chapters includes a brief overview of the topics and how they relate to readers and to readers' advisory service. The chapters provide practical advice, resources, and strategies as well as the theoretical underpinnings of informed practice. Resources for connecting readers with books are explored in multiple formats. Each chapter concludes with a section on further reading to enhance readers' advisory services.

Chapter 6, “Beyond the General Reference Interview,” provides strategies and tools for working with readers, especially in a mediated environment. Unlike many of the excellent readers’ advisory texts available, it emphasizes the new developments in RA, especially those mediated by technology. While discussed briefly, this chapter looks beyond the traditional RA reference interview, pointing the user to other works that address the practical issue of how to conduct reference interviews.

Chapter 7, “Knowing a Few Good Books,” features strategies and tools for keeping current about books and authors, from visiting local booksellers to attending international book fairs (online or in person). It also explores opportunities and strategies for promoting the fiction collection and the library’s readers’ advisory services.

Chapter 8, “Reading in the Genres,” includes in-depth discussion of popular fiction versus literary fiction and exploration of the genres in general. It provides some general descriptions of genre fiction and introduces the notion of genre blending.

Chapter 9, “Adventure, Suspense, Thrillers, and Mysteries,” Chapter 10, “Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror,” and Chapter 11, “Romance, Historical Fiction, and Westerns,” provide an introduction to specific genres along with suggested authors and books. Each chapter considers elements of appeal, historical aspects and trends, and organizations and associations that support interest in individual genres.

Chapter 12, “Merging, Emerging, and Re-emerging Genres,” considers other forms of fiction reading that are more topical in nature, but that form unique bodies of literature appealing to various groups of readers. Of particular usefulness, the chapter provides resources for finding information about authors and titles for emerging genres that are not yet included in traditional tools.

Chapter 13, “Readers’ Advisory Services for Special Populations,” explores specialized user groups within the library community, ranging from patrons with disabilities to adult new readers, and includes resources and reading suggestions to meet their unique needs. The chapter also includes strategies for using the library’s whole collection to meet the unique needs of special populations.
Part IV: Notate Bene

Nota bene (or the plural form notate bene) is a Latin phrase meaning “note well,” indicating that the reader should pay special attention to the matter at hand. Part IV covers many of the ancillary aspects of reading, which are of great importance to understanding the reader’s interests and needs. This portion of A Few Good Books includes the following chapters.

Chapter 14, “List Culture,” examines the array of bestsellers, reader-created and literary tastes lists, and resources for finding reading lists.

Chapter 15, “Book Awards and Award-Winning Books,” discusses a variety of major literary and popular book awards, including the American Library Association Notable Books awards, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and the Nobel Prize for Literature. It also describes state and regional book awards and awards for the individual genres.

Chapter 16, “Reading Groups Old and New,” focuses on shared reading experiences. It examines book discussion groups from their earliest forms to contemporary online book discussion groups. It includes many print and electronic resources for supporting book discussion groups as well as strategies for forming and maintaining them.

Chapter 17, “Reading Events—A Celebration of Reading, Books, and Authors,” celebrates reading within the community through events such as “The Big Read” and book festivals. At their heart, reading events create an atmosphere for open dialogue and promote understanding of diverse communities through a shared experience.

Chapter 18, “Reflections on the Future of Reading and Readers’ Advisory,” is the culmination of the text. The chapter brings us full circle, considering the challenges ahead in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse community of readers.

Several extensive appendixes conclude this book. The intent is to provide access to current materials for meeting the needs of readers. Many electronic resources and Web sites are included. As of the completion of this text, all Web addresses were current and active, but keep in mind that by nature the Web is dynamic and changeable.

A Few Good Books: Using Contemporary Readers’ Advisory Strategies to Connect Readers with Books is written for you, the reader, the librarian, or student, by a lover of books and advocate for reading. It is with great pleasure that the collective knowledge of many librarians and readers is passed to you, empowering you to serve the readers in your communities far and wide, from the first hesitant steps in finding a good book to the enthusiastic sharing of a “good read.”
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