

THE READERS' ADVISORY GUIDE TO  
**GENRE FICTION**

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THIRD EDITION

Neal Wyatt  
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# Series Introduction

*Joyce Saricks and Neal Wyatt*

SERIES EDITORS

In a library world in which finding answers to readers' advisory questions is often considered among our most daunting service challenges, library staff need guides that are supportive, accessible, and immediately useful. The titles in this series are designed to be just that. They help advisors become familiar with fiction genres and nonfiction subjects, especially those they don't personally read. They provide ready-made lists of "need to know" elements, such as key authors and read-alikes, as well as tips on how to keep up with trends and important new authors and titles.

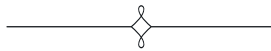
Written by librarians with years of RA experience who are also enthusiasts of the genre or subject, the titles in this series of practical guides emphasize an appreciation of the topic, focusing on the elements and features fans enjoy, so advisors unfamiliar with the topics can readily appreciate why they are so popular.

Because this series values the fundamental concepts of readers' advisory work and its potential to serve readers, viewers, and listeners in whatever future space libraries inhabit, the focus of each book is on appeal and how appeal crosses genre, subject, and format, especially to include audio and video as well as graphic novels. Thus, each guide emphasizes the importance of whole collection readers' advisory and explores ways to make suggestions that include novels, nonfiction, and multimedia, as well as how to incorporate whole collection elements into displays and booklists.

Each guide includes sections designed to help librarians in their RA duties, be that daily work or occasional interactions. Topics covered in each volume include:

- The appeal of the genre or subject and information on subgenres and types so that librarians might understand the breadth and scope of the topic and how it relates to other genres and subjects. A brief history is also included to give advisors context and highlight beloved classic titles.

- Descriptions of key authors and titles with explanations of why they're important: why advisors should be familiar with them and why they should be kept in our collections. Lists of read-alikes accompany these core author and title lists, allowing advisors to move from identifying a key author to helping patrons find new authors to enjoy.
- Information on how to conduct the RA conversation so that advisors can learn the tools and skills needed to develop deeper connections between their collections and their communities of readers, listeners, and viewers.
- A crash course in the genre or subject designed to get staff up to speed. Turn to this section to get a quick overview of the genre or subject as well as a list of key authors and read-alikes.
- Resources and techniques for keeping up-to-date and understanding new developments in the genre or subject are also provided. This section will not only aid staff already familiar with the genre or subject, but will also help those not familiar learn how to become so.
- Tips for marketing collections and lists of resources and awards round out the tools staff need to be successful working with their community.



As readers who just happen to be readers' advisors, we hope that the guides in this series lead to longer to-be-read, -watched, and -listened-to piles. Our goal is that the series helps those new to RA feel supported and less at sea, and introduces new ideas or new ways of looking at foundational concepts, to advisors who have been at this a while. Most of all, we hope that this series helps advisors feel excited and eager to help patrons find their next great title. So dig in, explore, learn, and enjoy the almost alchemical process of connecting title and reader!

# Introduction

## APPEAL AND GENRE

### *Gateway Frameworks for Working with Readers*

**T**his book is designed to help librarians become familiar with fiction genres, especially those that they do not regularly read. It suggests a framework for thinking about the essential nature of genres, in large-scale classifications, and how they relate to, and depart from, one another. It is intended to be a springboard for broader thinking when working with readers, a resource for further study, and a training tool.

The goal of readers' advisory (RA) service is to help readers discover titles they are currently in the mood to read. It is one of the most rewarding areas of our profession. Advisors have the pleasure of helping readers find titles that they will enjoy, that will enrich their lives, and that will speak to them about their life concerns and dreams. Advisors respect readers' choices, listen and respond to their interests, and help them navigate the fascinating and fulfilling world of stories. Advisors offer suggestions that are as expansive as possible. They might suggest a tight appeal match between two Space Operas or more wide-ranging connections such as a classic British domestic novel paired with the TV series *Downton Abbey*. They might even offer soundtracks from Science Fiction films to accompany an exploration of that genre.

The guiding concept supporting this work is the appeal framework—the set of terms that advisors use to classify works based on features to which readers respond: pacing, characterization, story line, frame/setting, tone, and language/style.<sup>1</sup> Also central is the creation of genre studies—detailed examinations of the unique aspects of a genre, its various subdivisions, and its core features, authors, and titles.

This book builds upon the concept of appeal and the classifying nature of genre studies to offer a different way to understand how large groups of novels relate to one another. Rather than viewing genre as one way to classify a title and appeal as a second way, we propose the merger of the two, arguing that genres themselves can be classified by appeal.

For example, consider the various audiences for Dan Simmons's *The Terror*, recently adapted as a limited TV series. Horror readers may

appreciate the mounting fear engendered by the monster lurking on the ice. Historical Fiction readers may enjoy the vividly realized details of life and explorations in the 1840s. Perhaps Literary Fiction fans relish the layered story with its provocative look at voyages of discovery on physical, emotional, and intellectual levels. Adventure fans may thrill to the survival story with its gritty details of ice floes and the long trek across frozen plains. Viewers of the series might enjoy the tension and eeriness, along with the setting and costuming.

How might advisors describe the book differently to these groups of patrons to let them know about elements in this book that might interest them? More important, how can advisors think about genre and appeal in ways that help patrons best navigate titles like *The Terror*? Although experience has taught us that patrons have particular expectations for their reading choices—they want Adrenaline novels that race forward in a manner that James Rollins ably achieves, or they want historical Horror books that bring history and place to life as does *The Hunger* by Alma Katsu—how do advisors take what they know about appeal and genre and work with titles as multifaceted as Simmons’s? One answer is to recognize the novel’s specific appeals while at the same time considering its various genre appeals in their broadest conception, which helps advisors think of different—and more—levels, combinations, and options when assisting readers.

Doing so also helps librarians respond to the shifting nature of genre itself. Genre is not as stable a classifying system as it once was. Genres blend and overlap, making strict divisions difficult to delineate. Authors known for writing in one genre increasingly import elements from others, reshaping the outlines of a once familiar category. Others are busy inventing new subgenres that shift the literary landscape completely. Authors such as John Grisham and Dennis Lehane, whom advisors happily boxed into Legal Thrillers and Mysteries, respectively, have tossed aside those boundaries and experimented with different genres altogether. N. K. Jemisin writes work so fluid that readers could make strong arguments for counting her as a key author in both Fantasy and Science Fiction. The influence of the paranormal has infiltrated many genres, while Slipstream and Weird are challenging the definitions of Literary Fiction and Fantasy. Niche genres such as Laboratory Lit burst on the scene, gain attention, then fade into the background when a new “pop-up” genre appears. In short, we are living in a post-genre period, one in which genre borders blur, merge, and disappear, and readers follow authors and appeal elements that please them.



In consequence, this third edition builds on the previous two and expands the role of appeal as a way to see beyond the confines of any particular genre. Although knowledge of a genre's conventions is vital in understanding its draw for readers, the ability to see beyond a genre's boundaries makes RA librarians an even more valuable resource and guide for those they serve.

## The Genre-Appeal Framework

As *The Terror* illustrates, a new and broader understanding of genre and appeal as co-relevant in the process of RA is necessary to fully comprehend this complex literary landscape. Such an understanding enables advisors to gather a number of different genres together into units based upon core appeal concepts. These larger groupings illuminate the connections between various genres, affinities that sometimes get overlooked in genre studies where the aim is to create clear definitions, distinctions, and matches.

The regroupings of genres by appeal prompt broad thinking about possible read, watch, and listen-alike matches as they foster combinations that more confining definitions discourage. The regroupings further help advisors work with the increasing number of genre blends, offering a way to more fully understand novels that cross borders and to identify the central appeals that migrate alongside.

As a concept for doing just this, the Genre-Appeal framework reimagines genres as appeal-rich units that encompass individual genres. The framework consists of four groupings based upon appeal:

### *Adrenaline Genres*

Adventure, Thrillers, and Suspense

### *Intellect Genres*

Psychological Suspense, Mystery, Literary Fiction,  
and Science Fiction

### *Landscape Genres*

Fantasy, Westerns, and Historical Fiction

### *Emotion Genres*

Relationship Fiction, Romance, and Horror

Although still including individual genres, these larger groupings illustrate how appeal works across genre lines. For example, readers who

appreciate fast-paced books with a strong edge of tension do not care whether these books are termed *Suspense*, *Thrillers*, or *Adventure*. They want the page-turning pace that drives these novels. In the face of genre blending and experimentation, and the ubiquity of marketing campaigns that use whatever terms are thought to catch a reader's eye, attempting to make fine distinctions between such books seems increasingly futile, a point we make clear in the discussion of the Adrenaline subgenres in chapter 1.

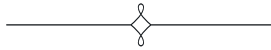
Although this book seeks to expand the RA concept of genres and broaden the boxes into which librarians mentally classify books, no container is large enough to hold every possible combination. A fast-paced book cataloged as Mystery or Psychological Suspense might very well please Adrenaline fans. Certainly, readers of Horror and Dark Fantasy recognize the links between those genres. Even blending across multiple genre-appeal units is far from uncommon as Gail Carriger, China Miéville, and Jim Butcher illustrate with novels that cross between Fantasy/Science Fiction/Romance (Carriger), between Fantasy/Science Fiction/Horror (Miéville), and between Fantasy/Science Fiction/Mystery/Urban Fiction (Butcher).

Readers, librarians, critics, and marketers have already developed terms to deal with works that range far outside their narrow genre boxes: Crime Fiction, Speculative Fiction, and Urban Fiction. Crime Fiction is self-defining. It gathers together novels that have crime as their core subject. Mystery, Thrillers, Suspense, Psychological Suspense, and Romantic Suspense fall into this umbrella classification. Sometimes it can sweep in books from the Western and Literary Fiction genres as well. Speculative Fiction gathers novels that are concerned with the supernatural, the flicker of the imaginary in an otherwise realistic world, and futuristic settings and story lines. Fantasy and Science Fiction as well as Horror are key Speculative Fiction genres. Weird, Slipstream, and Magical Realism, and thus plenty of Literary Fiction, also qualify. Urban Fiction is location specific. It defines novels that are set in cities. It gathers books from Fantasy, Romance, Relationship Fiction, Literary Fiction, Mystery, and Speculative Fiction. It crosses with Crime Fiction and includes Street Lit. We use the terms *Crime Fiction*, *Speculative Fiction*, and *Urban Fiction* throughout the book but find them too broad to capture appeal at a granular level. Horror and Magical Realism can have strong ties, for example, but as Joe Hill and Sarah Addison Allen illustrate, they can be light-years apart as well.

Genres do continue to stand alone. The genre-appeal groupings used in this book do not ignore the particular nature of an individual genre.

Many readers appreciate the core of their favorite genres and dislike the infiltration by others. Learning about individual genres is as important as mastering how they combine. Similarly, the genre-appeal framework does not imply that novels within each broad category serve as read-alikes for each other. Relationship Fiction and Horror are fundamentally different. But understanding that fans of each are drawn in by a novel's visceral emotional engagement helps illuminate their similar underlying appeals.

The point is to understand genre not as a limiting classification but as a designation that is appeal-rich in and of itself. A genre can stand alone, can be part of a larger appeal matrix, and can be blended with another genre, which expands its appeal ever wider. The advantage to considering the larger appeal of genres is that it provides a broader perspective. When faced with a reader who "only" reads Mysteries or Romances, the best answer for that reader may well be a book that adheres tightly to traditional genre conventions, but it also might be a book that ranges beyond those conventions. The genre-appeal framework encourages advisors to listen to readers' descriptions of the books they enjoy and consider suggesting not just titles within a particular genre but the possible connections among genres as well. To that end, each separate genre chapter in this book includes strategies to expand advisors' knowledge of genres, to understand the genre on its own and within its larger unit, and to work across genres, even across units.



Everything in this book builds on the premise that to learn about fiction and to satisfy readers, advisors need to be open to a range of possibilities. Most readers appreciate the conversation and the process more than they do a quick and standard answer. With that in mind, this book is not meant to be definitive but, rather, suggestive of possibilities. Genres are not static; writers are not confined to prescribed templates; readers take from books what strikes them, whether or not it goes counter to common knowledge of those books or expert opinion.

## How This book Is Arranged

Each chapter follows the same pattern and discusses the topics described in this section.

*A Definition of the Genre.* Although we are generally skeptical of definitions, it is useful to have a working delineation if only to help advisors

new to the genre understand its general parameters and intents. The definitions supplied are based on how readers perceive the genre: what they expect to find in the books and how they would likely define the genre if they were asked. In most cases, there is discussion of what a particular genre is not and how it differs from related genres. In all cases, an attempt is made to keep the definitions open and flexible so as not to box advisors or readers into unprofitable corners.

*Characteristics and Appeal.* Each chapter lists the characteristics of the genre based on appeal: pacing, characterization, story line, frame/setting, tone, and language/style. These appeals are arranged in order of importance for each genre, and thus the order in which they are addressed varies by chapter.

*Key Authors.* Key authors are those whose names are familiar to genre fans and who serve, at the time this book was written, as hallmark authors of each genre. These are the names that make best-seller lists, get reviewed, win awards, and otherwise dominate book coverage.

*What We Know about Fans.* This section covers what fans expect to find in the genre and the pleasures they take from it. Included as well are insights about how readers engage with books and with librarians.

*Sure Bets.* Titles that appeal consistently to a wide range of readers, from die-hard fans to those new to a genre, are included in this section. Sure Bets are valuable because mentioning them lets fans know that advisors understand the touchstones of the genre. Such a list also helps advisors have a ready suggestion for readers new to the genre or in search of “something good to read.”

*Expanding Readers’ Horizons: Reading among Genres.* As genres cross and blend, readers are led in ever-wider circles. This section suggests genres that can be profitably combined and highlights authors from one genre that fans of another might want to read.

*Expanding Readers’ Horizons: Reading the Whole Collection.* Genre works are not limited by media format or call number. This section helps advisors make connections between genre fiction and the nonfiction collection as well as between novels and other media such as film, audiobooks, music, podcasts, games, and graphic novels. It is intended as a launching pad for creative mixes of forms—those held in the library and those making up our broader media lives.

*Trends.* Genres are never static. This section identifies some current trends and forecasts a few trends to come.



Advisors are likely to disagree with some of the statements and definitions and most certainly with the choice of some of the key authors and titles included in this book—and that is how it should be. Reacting to the choices here and developing their own questions and answers through their own explorations will lead advisors to a deeper understanding of authors, genres, and why readers enjoy them.

It is our hope that this book prompts many such explorations. The appendix, “Hack This Book and the Five-Book Challenge,” makes explicit this desire. This book concludes with an invitation to pull the book apart and apply it to your own library collection. We also offer a Five-Book Challenge, a list of titles in each genre that advisors might read themselves and share with readers.

## How to Get the Most from This Book

Advisors might wish to use this book as an aid in individual training, as support for staff training, or as a resource for genre studies. Beyond these uses (each addressed in this section), this book can also support collection building by identifying key authors and titles and prompt creative approaches to whole collection RA service.

### *Individual Training*

This book was envisioned as a guide for librarians wishing to explore fiction genres. Although advisors may want to read through quickly to gain an overview of the genres, we encourage them to spend time considering each genre in turn. Read the chapter, explore the authors and titles included, and talk with fans and staff about what they enjoy. Once sufficient baseline knowledge is attained, put it to use by developing displays, creating an annotated booklist, suggesting titles to fans, and attracting others to the genre. And keep reading. Developing skills in genre studies is ongoing.

### *Staff Training*

This book was also designed as a tool—either an initial training document or a genre refresher—for both new and experienced staff. Even if staff members are familiar with a genre, the descriptions, authors, and titles included act as reminders of aspects they might have forgotten, prompt deeper thinking, and highlight links among authors and genres.

## **Genre Study**

Although this book is really the result of a number of genre studies, with each chapter's "Characteristics and Appeal" section reflecting the kind of list one would expect from such an undertaking, it could also be the starting point for a genre study. Remember, however, that this book is not meant to be prescriptive. Advisors will make additional discoveries as they read and talk about a genre with staff and with readers at their libraries. Tips for "Studying a Genre" as well as guidelines for setting up a genre study group are discussed in some detail in the third edition of *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*.

Additionally, a wealth of information on specific genres can be found in ALA Editions' individual genre titles, such as *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Historical Fiction* by Jennifer S. Baker, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Mystery* by John Charles, Candace Clark, Joanne Hamilton-Selway, and Joanna Morrison, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Blends* by Megan M. McArdle, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature* by Vanessa Irvin (Morris), and *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Horror* by Becky Siegel Spratford. The Libraries Unlimited/ABC-CLIO title, *Genreflecting*, as well as the many individual genre titles that are part of the broader Genreflecting series, are also useful resources.

## **How to Keep Up with Changes in a Genre**

Studying a genre and reading it extensively provide advisors with an understanding of its appeal at a certain point in time. With new books published every year and authors continually pushing the boundaries of the genres in which they write, the prospect of staying current seems beyond even the most dedicated librarian.

Because advisors can never read as many novels as fans of a genre do, it is important to develop ways to keep current with developments, trends, and new authors. Social media and websites provide authors and fans platforms to announce new titles, share buzz, and dig into genre issues and changes. Following authors and publishers helps advisors keep up to date.

Pay attention to genre awards as well. Awards supply a list of possible key authors and Sure Bets; tracking new award categories indicates changes in the genre; and monitoring what wins (and is shortlisted) helps highlight the appeals that fans (and fellow authors, librarians, or critics, depending on the award) appreciate. Reading reviews remains essential

as well. *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Library Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly* consistently address new developments and highlight genre titles and key authors. Local and national newspapers as well as popular magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* are equally important sources.

Fans of a genre, if they are comfortable talking with staff, are an excellent source of information on developments, emerging authors, and key titles. Soliciting their comments, as well as observing trends in reserve placements, can provide advisors with extensive information. Attending genre-specific conferences and book-centric trade shows, if that is a possibility, is another way to stay on top of a genre, meet authors and fans, and discover more and different resources for keeping abreast of trends.

Of course, consistently including a selection of genres in a personal reading plan is essential and augments all other ways of keeping up (see the Five-Book Challenge).

## What This Book Is Not

One false expectation created by this type of book is that all authors can be classified within a specific genre. Not every author fits neatly into a genre, not every book by an author fits in the same genre, and not all readers see an author (or a genre) in the same way. Equally tempting is the desire to define genres tightly, even though no definition can fully capture every element of every book ever considered part of a genre. Trying to craft such definitions is pointless; as soon as one settles on a definition, a persuasive number of titles illustrating its shortcomings appear. Rather than create boxes to contain titles so that advisors can examine them, this book aims to break down the walls of classification so advisors can see beyond genre borders.

This book is not a comprehensive study of any genre nor a complete catalog of its key authors and Sure Bets. Neither is it a complete catalog of every genre a reader or librarian might define. Each chapter provides an introduction to a genre and considers why readers enjoy it. Examples are meant to be indicative of the genre's appeal to readers. Author and title examples were selected with a mix of aims: to be illustrative, to highlight best sellers and key names, and to represent the range of the genre. Advisors interested in pursuing their study of genres beyond this book will find a wealth of books, blogs, Internet discussion lists, and other resources devoted to individual genres with even more author and title suggestions to explore. For the most up-to-date list of available resources, post a query on social media or Fiction\_L, the readers' advisory electronic

discussion list ([fictionl@listserver.cuyahogalibrary.net](mailto:fictionl@listserver.cuyahogalibrary.net)), and mine the collective wisdom of the field. Or seek out websites run by fans; these readers are up to date and cutting edge, and they have their finger on the hot titles, and hot-button issues, of the genres they love.

Finally, this book is not meant to be prescriptive. Our goal has been to create a framework that makes understanding the appeal of genre fiction easier. Our experience in providing readers' advisory service and staff training indicates that it is important to have such a framework so that advisors can organize their thinking and suggestion processes and, ultimately, form their own individual methods. When advisors discover an author or hear a patron describe a title, they can use the framework to determine how that author or novel might fit into a genre or, if it does not fit exactly, to decide on the important appeals and genre conventions that matter to readers. Over time, advisors using the framework might adapt and change it, adding or altering a group. This is always the hope of the readers' advisory community—that an idea will aid advisors not only in serving readers but also in furthering the ways advisors understand and improve all of our work.

## Beyond This Guide

Frankly, genre classification is antithetical to readers' advisory work, in which advisors focus on what readers want and cross genre lines with abandon while making suggestions. There are books that defy classification. There are groups of books that advisors name, such as "gentle reads," that draw from so many genres they cannot be defined as even a subgenre of fiction. There are other books in subgenres or newly emerging units that are not considered in this guide but that readers simply adore. Literature is a wild, wonderfully messy, always inventive universe.

So why write a book that attempts to corral the literary spree into a confined number of chapters with formal guidelines and definitions? Because understanding fiction is the backbone of advisory work, and understanding genre conventions and the authors who exemplify those conventions is what allows advisors to move readers from one genre to another, to be the knowledgeable resource that readers expect and deserve.

Our task as readers' advisors is to show fans that we value the fiction genres, nonfiction subjects, and media formats they enjoy—those in this book and beyond. Advisors demonstrate this attribute by becoming familiar with all genres popular with our readers. They do so as well by making the collection accessible and rich, keeping series intact, and acquiring



the resources needed to serve patrons. Most critically, advisors talk with readers, engaging in conversations that connect their reading lives to the library and its holdings.

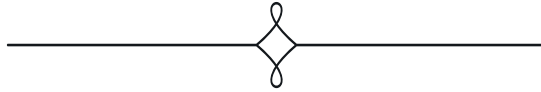
As readers ourselves, we know how important it is to be able to find books to suit our needs. Our patrons are readers too, and their desires are no different from ours, pointing to the universal pleasures of reading. Sometimes readers want a page-turner, a book that keeps them so engrossed that they stay up reading all night long. Sometimes they prefer a book that pulls them into its lyricism, and they savor every word. Sometimes readers seek a book that makes them think about the world in a new way. Just as there is a reader for every book, according to Ranganathan, there is a book for every mood and need.<sup>2</sup> Advisors help readers find the books they want, and need, to read. To do the job fully and well, advisors have an obligation to read broadly and with intent. We must also make readers comfortable so that they feel safe asking for suggestions and assistance.

Readers' advisors have a corner on the market of all the best things in the world. We have a collection of books at our fingertips, and we know how to find just what we want. We understand too that popular fiction and nonfiction meet a variety of needs that range from pleasurable escape to the paradigms by which we make life's important decisions. We know we can find passion, suspense, adventure, intrigue, mystery, provocative issues, and intellectual stimulation in the books that fill our libraries. In turn we are privileged to share these books with our readers—books that feed their spirits, emotions, and intellects. Works that help readers understand their own predicament and that of others, that teach tolerance, amuse, and inspire. Sharing these stories becomes both our goal and our pleasure.

## NOTES

1. These terms are defined by Joyce Saricks in the third edition of *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* and in her *Booklist* "At Leisure" columns. Readers unfamiliar with these terms might wish to refer to Saricks's work for a detailed explanation of appeal. See Joyce G. Saricks, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2005), 40–73; Joyce Saricks, "At Leisure with Joyce Saricks: Tone and Mood," *Booklist* 106, no. 15 (2010): 21; and Joyce Saricks, "At Leisure with Joyce Saricks: Updating Appeal—Language and Style," *Booklist* 109, no. 13 (2013): 19.
2. S. R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (Madras: The Madras Library Association, 1931), 299–335, [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b99721;view=1up;seq=13](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b99721;view=1up;seq=13).

# The Adrenaline Genre



## Adventure, Thrillers, and Suspense

Speed is essential to the Adrenaline genre. The pace must be compelling, the story line gripping, in order to keep readers turning pages, often staying up all night to finish the book. This is the quintessential experience of the genre: a novel so involving that readers sacrifice sleep, stay on the subway past their stop, and decide to order in rather than put the book down and cook dinner. Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* is an excellent example, one gaining relevancy as the film franchise gathers a new audience. Exciting and a bit scary, the rocket-fast pace never lets up. Joakim Zander's *The Believer* features all the speed and action that readers expect, along with a ripped-from-the-headlines story that makes the novel even more arresting. Lisa Gardner's *Look for Me* provides an edgy, dark story of abuse and murder with plenty of twists and turns. These tension-filled stories race toward their conclusions with danger, looming threat, or imminent demise frequently at hand, always keeping readers on the edge of their seats.

# Adrenaline

**T**he long-lost symbolic language of the Mayans, hinting of treasures untold and the promise of everlasting life. A spy ring risking death while cleverly exchanging coded signals. A dangerous game of cat and mouse, in which a husband receives a call from his wife, long thought dead. These are the classic story elements of Adventure, Thriller, and Suspense. The stories have fueled many successful films and have kept readers up all night turning pages, uncaring of how bleary-eyed they will be in the morning, so intent are they on finding out what happens next.

Novels from these genres fill our collections, top best-seller lists, and keep readers happy for hours on end as they offer addictive stories that occupy an appeal sweet spot: tightly plotted, quickly paced, detailed, engrossing, nimbly written, and featuring characters with whom readers easily engage. These elements create an inescapable desire to find out what will happen and to whom, and fuel an immersive, forget-the-world-around-you reading experience.

## A Definition

Adrenaline describes fast-paced novels designed to quickly capture and sustain reader interest through action-filled plots and tense atmospheres.

Advisors might be wondering at our brevity: why not an expansive definition that details the differences between Adventure, Thriller, and Suspense? At this point advisors might even be paging forward to see if there are individual chapters on each of these genres. There are not.

Joyce Saricks developed the idea of Adrenaline novels in the second edition of this book, using the term to describe the overarching appeal of the Adventure, Thriller, and Suspense genres. In this third edition, based on the trends in these genres and the decisions of advisors, catalogers, and library marketers, we offer a new formulation and new way of thinking of these books. Adrenaline *is* the genre. Adventure, Thriller, and Suspense are so closely combined that it is more effective to think of them as sub-genres of Adrenaline rather than separate entities.

It is easy to list the reasons Adrenaline novels are so addictive and simple to generate an account of the key authors at any given moment. However, it is frustratingly difficult and rather pointless to continue to try to define these books as distinct. Indeed, of all the works considered in this book, the tangled strands of Adventure, Thriller, and Suspense are the hardest to separate. In the previous edition, Joyce Saricks focused on specific details. Adventures followed “warriors who experience danger and overcome obstacles in exotic locales.”<sup>1</sup> The key to a Thriller was “the frame of the story, the details of the profession, and the way in which the hero uses his skill and knowledge within that profession to extricate himself from a dangerous situation.”<sup>2</sup> Suspense, on the other hand, rested upon “the point of view from which the story is told. . . . The reader knows of whom and what to be frightened, even though the protagonist does not. The reader is kept on edge, always anticipating the danger to come. Even if the hero thinks he is safe, the reader knows he is not.”<sup>3</sup>

Those precise differences, while certainly true and critical at the time, have become less central and reliable. They were easier to see and use in a readers’ advisory context when Tom Clancy, John Grisham, and James Patterson were writing their genre-defining novels. The publishing world has since changed, and the differences between Adventure, Thriller, and Suspense are now far more technical than actual. At times completely nonexistent. That is to say that Thrillers often feature “warriors who experience danger and overcome obstacles” (just ask Jack Reacher), and some do so in exotic locales. Adventures often have rich framing details, and the hero has specialized knowledge he uses “to extricate himself from a dangerous situation” (see Clive Cussler), and it is not only in Suspense where the reader knows more than the protagonist (as Robert Langdon and Dan Brown prove).

The Library of Congress, recognizing the same problems of differentiation for catalogers as those that advisors face, often suggests the use of all three terms at once, as it does with Clive Cussler's *Odessa Sea*, offering the trilogy of "Thrillers (Fiction)," "Action and adventure fiction," and "Suspense fiction." Following suit, RA databases, such as NoveList, have combined Thrillers and Suspense into one genre heading. Library marketers often use the terms most likely to sell a book, and those terms change and recombine based on taste and the times.

All this is to say that though there is undoubtedly a difference between reading a Dreda Say Mitchell novel and one by Clive Cussler, what they have in common—a gripping story designed to keep readers engaged and quickly turning pages—outweighs all other appeals. Recognizing that advisors most often work on the fly, taking guidance from book jackets and publisher information as well as reviews (which commingle terms as well), it is now the best practice to understand these books as subgenres of the Adrenaline genre. We detail their differences in the "Subgenres" section, acknowledging where they diverge in story line, characterization, and tone.

## Characteristics and Appeal

### ***Pacing***

The rapid speed at which the story unfolds is the central appeal of these novels; all else is secondary. Action dominates, greatly informs the plot, and contributes to the structure of the novel. It is common to find books in this genre with some kind of clock represented on the page. There are time/date stamps at the heads of chapters, placed there to emphasize the idea that every minute counts. Other novels are laid out in sections, day by day, or even with specific times throughout the day indicated with paragraph headers. This arrangement and reminder of a clock ticking away help create a relentless sense of speed. The story is moving; it is rushing toward its tense final showdown, and the reader is in for a wild ride.

The fast-paced reading experience is also supported by a narrow time frame, often only a matter of days. There may be flashbacks to previous events to fill in details, but the actual story is compressed, urgent. Events and relationships are often telescoped as well, underscoring the genre's exceptionally short time frames. The resulting sense of brevity pushes readers forward. They know, even in the rare lulls in the action, that everything is moving apace. Other methods authors deploy to create

speed include short chapters, alternating points of view, and cliffhanger chapter endings. Frequent reversals of expectations, plot twists, and sudden revelations are also hallmarks. All these elements create an engrossing sense of continuous movement, an inescapable chain that sharply tugs readers forward.

### ***Story Line***

Action and conflict distinguish the genre, and the story line emphasizes this orientation. These novels build from event to event, offering the reader a rush of movement to follow. The stories vary widely across the subgenres, but the central event is always dangerous, usually with deadly ramifications. As a result, the common story element of all Adrenaline novels is survival. That can mean outrunning a lab-created dinosaur, escaping an ISIS plot, or outwitting a killer.

Story lines may be contemporary or historical, involving experts of all kinds, military personnel, or everyday citizens caught up in something far bigger than they know. No matter the setting nor the particular cast of characters in the story, the plot revolves around escapes from perilous situations.

As expected in stories of such high stakes, Adrenaline novels are full of violence. Adventures might feature graphic violence and high body counts or cartoon violence, or, as with the more literary stories, the mayhem may happen offstage. Thrillers and Suspense are even more blood-soaked. High body counts seem to be the norm, and though this may be troubling for readers unfamiliar with the genre, for fans the page-turning pace means that the violence sometimes goes practically unnoticed, unless it is particularly descriptive or extended.

### ***Tone***

With violence and danger dominating the genre, it is small wonder that the tone of most of these books veers toward gritty darkness. Even though the resolution is usually satisfactory in these books, with the protagonists triumphing, the tone is often melancholy, even bleak. The main character may have survived but others have not, and what has been endured is hard to forget. Vivid details and building suspense add to the ominous atmosphere. This is not to say that the entire genre is gloomy. Readers encounter a broad spectrum of tones ranging from the upbeat, even comic, to the grim. See the “Subgenres” section later in this chapter for specific varieties.

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