See Also:

Book Appeal, Literacy, and the Reader: Readers' advisory in practice and theory

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Abstract:

This paper examines the development of "appeal factors" as a guiding principle of modern readers' advisory (RA) services and training programs in public libraries. There is a growing body of literature that suggests this method, with the focus on factors intrinsic to the materials, limits the profession's understanding of how readers experience reading and understand that experience. In examining existing literature, it is clear that more research is needed on how the reader, rather than the material, impacts the success of the readers' advisory experience. If RA is to survive and thrive into future iterations of public library practice, then it is essential that we push the existing materials-focused model of book appeal into a more nuanced and reader-focused model.

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The modern revival of public library readers' advisory (RA) services that has developed since the 1980s has perpetuated, both in practice and in professional literature, a focus on the concept of "appeal" with particular regard to fiction and genre literature. There exists a vast number of monographs, such as the popular *Genreflecting* series from Libraries Unlimited, that educate RA practitioners on the specific qualities of certain genres of fiction or, less frequently, non-fiction. Additionally the highly influential works of RA advocate Joyce Saricks have promoted a focus on the "appeal factors" of books or, as another RA advocate Nancy Pearl calls them, the "doorways" into books. These appeal factors or doorways have influenced professional guides to RA skills, conference sessions, professional development workshops, and even the structure of RA databases like NoveList. The concept of a book's appeal has become a standard method for giving clarity and structure to the process of matching books to readers.

This standardization is, as Keren Dali notes, the strength of this approach to professionally recommending a book. The focus on a book, author, or genre's appeal is "specific and concrete […] easily broken down into discrete components and, as such, easily presented, taught, and explained; most important, it can be readily adapted for the purpose of information retrieval in various RA tools" (Dali, 2014, p. 23). It is worth asking, though, how it is that the factors that define a book or a genre's qualities have come to be equated in RA practice with how a reader understands both their selection process and reading experience with a book. There is an important but underdeveloped current in both RA literature and in library and information science (LIS) research that emphasizes the need for a richer theory of

the broader reading experience as it informs book selection, not only within the library, but throughout the life of a reader. This paper will attempt to trace the currents of LIS research and professional discourse on the book selection process and suggest potential benefits of developing an LIS-based theory of the reading experience both within and outside of the library context as it impacts the book selection process and informs professional RA practices.

In 1997, the second edition of Joyce Sarick's and Nancy Brown's influential RA guide, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library,* included a new chapter called "Articulating a Book's Appeal." It offered a succinct description of five major appeal factors, including pacing, characterization, storyline, frame and tone, and style, that had a significant, long-term impact on cementing appeal factors as a primary RA technique. Other influential RA practitioners before and since have argued for slightly different formulations of these appeal factors, but the focus has largely remained on schemas of book selection criteria based on the characteristics of the materials rather than the reader's experiences. Nancy Pearl refers to her version of appeal factors, "doorways," as "experiential elements" and describes them in ways related to how a reader might feel about the experience of reading a book (2012). Yet while referencing the effect or impact of the novel on the reader, they are still directly connected to specific elements of the book itself: story, characters, setting, language. These appeal factor schemas can be traced back to the technique of asking readers to "tell me about a book you've read and enjoyed," which, since its codification in RA practice by Saricks in 1989, has had a defining impact on the structure of RA services. The concept of appeal factors serves as a clearly defined and concrete method for answering why a book was enjoyed and then organizing books based upon similar answers (Baker, 1996; Smith, 1996).

By learning to succinctly delineate how books connect together according to similar responses to the question of "why" a book was enjoyed (the appeal factors), RA practitioners develop a structured methodology, which is easy to articulate and teach. According to some researchers and practitioners, this has resulted in the equation of complex reading

experiences with "a strange faith that, if we find better ways to describe the object, we can more easily connect the object to patron" (Dali, 2014; Beard & Thi-Beard, 2008, p. 331). The same process occurred with the concept of genre as it evolved into a method whereby a set of RA tools could be easily developed to sort, connect, and structure readily apparent similarities across large numbers of books, which are then employed by RA practitioners to quickly interpret a reader's book selection needs or their usual book selection practices. This is not to suggest that the connection between genre and actual reading experiences is so artificial that it should be dismissed forever from our conceptions of the book selection process, but simply a reminder that "genre" is an intentional simplification that is organized around a set of related factors more dependent on the material itself than on the reader or their experience of reading. The same is true for appeal factors. In order to better understand the book selection process, the focus on what we read could be exchanged for a richer exploration of why we read.

LIS researchers and library practitioners have been slowly examining the process by which readers browse or search for and select fiction reading for over a century. In one of the earliest discussions of these topics from the 1890s, J. K. Hosmer addressed the concept of browsing with regards to conceptualizing varying degrees or levels of browsing (Goodall, 1989). This matches the time frame in which American libraries were first beginning to develop the concept of readers' advisory as a distinct library service (Crowley, 2005). However, a more systematic interest in browsing as a topic for research did not develop until the 1960s and 1970s. Even as early as 1977, it was possible for M. L. Ward to notice in a bibliography of studies on readers and library users spanning from 1900-1976 that there were many studies from the perspective of the library and a need for more studies from the perspective of the reader's experience (Goodall, 1989). It was not until the revival of RA services as an essential library function in the 1980s that research into browsing, searching, and selecting books extended into user studies that began to develop an understanding of the fiction reader alongside the impact of library structures and services. Examining this research provide clues into the persistent focus of RA literature and techniques on the evaluation of

materials and the equation of this materials evaluation schema with the experience of reading.

The process of book selection is much more complicated than browsing shelves or using search strategies to locate specific titles or works by specific authors and is much broader in context than simply what happens within the library. Yet early LIS research into this process focused on those two tactics, browsing or known title/author searching, from the perspective of selecting books from within the library alone, and primarily utilizing survey formats with pre-existing categories from which respondents could select (Ooi & Liew, 2011). Even as this research began to quantify how readers understood and used specific tactics for book selections in the library, they were still very much focused on the "perspective of the library," a perspective that has for a long time now been focused more on collections than on patrons. In her comparison of eight studies done in the United Kingdom during the 1980s on public library use with a focus on selecting reading materials, Deborah L. Goodall found minimal focus on how readers might have become aware of titles or authors outside of library spaces and services or on how their reading habits, beyond overall volume and fiction versus nonfiction, impacts their selection strategies (1989). This early research into fiction readers and the selection process was often marred by a lack of theoretical framework to guide the research design and the interpretation of results and consequently remained more "exploratory than explanatory" (Moyer, 2005, p. 223). Although it clarified how users located materials within the library, it was largely unable to explain, in either much detail or depth, the reader's conceptions of or reasons for why they used these tactics.

There is certainly a benefit to a better understanding of the major tactics used in book selection within public libraries and how successful users are in deploying these tactics. Early research revealed that "there is a lot of substitution going on" and that "frustration is one of the primary emotions experience by those who visit libraries" (Baker, 1996, p. 129). It seems possible that browsing is a method used more when directed searches fail and users choose to rely on serendipity more out of necessity than out of the intentional desire to find

something new. Goodall concluded that "it has been assumed [by public libraries] that fiction readers know what it is that they want and where to find it […] with this implied lack of interest it is hardly surprising that the majority of fiction readers have developed the 'browsing habit' and have come to rely on serendipity rather than staff help in choosing fiction" (1989, p. 52). It is important that public libraries are aware that their practices in terms of arranging materials, developing search tools, and employing selection aids such as curated book lists and browsable, curated book displays may be both a cause of as much as a reaction to the user's book selection strategies. Yet these conclusions do not reveal how these selection strategies and their success or failure rates are understood by readers in terms of their broader reading experiences, literacy skills, or the personal and interpersonal motivations that may be impacting both intentional and serendipitous book selection. Why, for instance, does a reader typically leave the library with a book even when their desired selection was not located and how does the resulting reading experience impact later book selection strategies (Baker, 1996)? Because it is lacking the richer contexts of the patron's experiences with book selection and reading, both within and beyond the library space, this research has at least as much of a focus on studying the practices of the libraries themselves as on understanding the practices of the readers.

Even recently researchers have examined, at a straightforward level, both what the primary search tactics are for locating fiction reading materials in public libraries and how basic demographic factors impact the use of these tactics. Anna Mikkonen and Pertti Vakkari used a simple yet carefully designed survey process, including demographic questions guided by previous research into common book search tactics in public libraries, "to determine whether age, gender, education and the number and the proportion of fiction books read was related to search tactics used" when selecting reading materials (2012, p. 216). Similar to other research from the 1980s, Mikkonen and Vakkari found that the tactic of searching based on a known author or book title was the most common, and that the second most common tactic of browsing was highly correlated to both a higher frequency of library visits and a higher proportion of fiction reading to non-fiction reading. Of interest to RA practice was the

finding that those over 45 and those with a mid-level of education were most likely to ask a librarian for assistance. An even more critical finding for both RA practice and LIS research was that various models assessing the results for variance in search strategy by the selected demographic factors and fiction/non-fiction reading habits "did not account for a large proportion of the variance of different search strategies. Thus, there is a lot of space for further studies identifying factors associated with the variation of search strategies for books in public libraries" (Mikkonen and Vakkari, 2012, p. 222). Age, gender, education level, the overall volume of books read, and the proportion of fiction to nonfiction reading did not account for a significant portion of book selection strategies. In fact, because Mikkonen and Vakkari were seeking empirical, qualitative data from the perspective of improving "system design information on search strategies," they selected a set of data points on readers that were readily identifiable and easily quantifiable (2012, p. 216). As their own literature review demonstrated, it is possible to look back at earlier research to find hints about what other less readily quantifiable factors correlated to the reading experience might play a critical role in book selection.

One LIS researcher who spent decades investigating the books selection process from the reader's perspective is Catherine Sheldrick Ross. Her work has not only been critical to developing holistic LIS theories into the book selection process and the experience of reading, but has been published as a practitioner-focused model that lists appeal factors of the materials as but one of five critical aspects of how readers select materials (Ross & Chelton, 2001). Ross' long-running, qualitative research into the habits of avid readers has illuminated some of the decision-making process that readers go through in both selecting and rejecting reading materials. Her research considers many factors that are outside or beyond the control of libraries and places the process of book selection in the context of the participant's wider reading lives. Ross suggests that readers are strongly guided by mood, ("what do I feel like reading" based on emotional state or other inner stimulus) and the desired experience of reading this implies, meaning that a large number of "personal factors interact to determine what a reader means at any given time by 'a good book'" (Ross 2000,

p. 12). In a similar but smaller qualitative study, Kami Ooi and Chern Li Liew found that, while mood was not a unanimously influential component of a reader's book selection process, the influence of life events, such as a vacation, was. Like Ross, they found that a variety of personal factors, such as personal networks, mass media consumption, financial considerations, and lifestyle choices, including how busy they were and the presence of children, played important roles in the book selection process (Ooi & Liew, 2010). In a case study of one reader over ten years, Duncan Smith explored how a reader's personal experiences impact their reading experiences, ensuring that book selection is always mediated through a reader's perceptions (Smith, 1996). In addition to problematizing the materials based focus of traditional book appeal factors, research into understanding how these complex personal factors impact book selection can have implications for practical decisions around developing and implementing RA services, from assessing the best location for or channel by which librarians could offer RA services to impacting how lists and displays are curated to match the life events, lifestyles, or moods that drive readers' selection strategies.

Of possibly even greater impact is the attention that Ross has given to the idea of book selection as a complex and under-theorized literacy strategy. Ross develops a concept of the reader's "behind the eyes knowledge," which allows them to select books based on expectations from their accumulated reading experience. Her research suggests that avid readers develop an elaborate book selection system based on their previous reading experience and "meta-knowledge" that might include publishers, cover art, and conventions of book marketing and promotion. The reader's selection system involves "many interrelated considerations, often starting with their own mood at the time of reading and going variously to how they find new authors or what clues they look for in the book itself" as well as input from a social network of trusted family and friends who recommend and loan books (Ross, 2000, p. 9; Saarinen & Vakkari, 2012). Although Ross focuses her research on what she calls "committed" readers, she pays careful attention to those readers who express less satisfaction with their book selection strategies, which then coincides with a decline in reading interest

and activity. The interviews she conducted suggest that successful book selection is critical because it threatens the overall reading experience in that successful choices are "a part of a self-reinforcing system that sustains the pleasure of reading itself, while disappointing choices kill the desire to read" (Ross, 2000, p. 12). Ross' claim is that this becomes a cycle where those who read the most are best able to scan their everyday environment for assessing potential book selections and to utilize clues contained on and within books to assess the level of trust that should be awarded to a book recommendation. The opposite is true for those who read only occasionally thus leading to less successful book selections and less reading. Although it is questionable that her research data on avid readers is sufficient to back up this claim in its entirety, it reveals some interesting areas for further research.

The idea that book selection is a type of literacy skill is one that some researchers have already begun to explore. In an interview-based research project, Katariina Saarinen and Pertti Vakkari assessed how readers identify the attributes of a good novel, locate and select a book, and how their level of "literary competence" impacts the selection process. They found that both avid and occasional readers conduct known item/author searches for materials, but that some avid readers were able to conduct more complex and successful catalogue searches using index terms from novels they had previously enjoyed. Furthermore, occasional readers were much less likely to browse, and, when doing so, had a smaller mental repertoire of author's names, book titles, and other criteria by which to assess books for selection (Saarinen & Pertti, 2013). Their study was fairly small in size and was complicated by the fact that they were simultaneously applying a reader classification framework from P. Lukin that organized readers into escapists, esthetes, and realists. However, it represents an interesting complement to the work of Ross, and to her claim that the skill of book selection is a neglected and under-taught aspect of lifelong literacy, suggesting a critical space both for further research and for investment in re-evaluating the methods of RA practices.

Keren Dali is another LIS researcher who has suggested an alternate model for the concept of "appeal" as applied to book selection and RA practices so as to account for both book-

related appeal and reader-related appeal. Dali proposes shifting from a focus on book appeal to reading appeal where reading appeal is a two-dimensional function of both book-related and reader-driven appeal elements, and the definition of appeal being "the power to invoke interest in reading and to set off an action of reading" (Dali, 2014, p. 42). She suggest a clear set of book-related and reader-driven appeal factors and a clear theoretical model for further research of the validity of these factors. She also suggests considering the book selection and reading experience temporally, as an ongoing process that continually shifts the perceived value of appeal factors for readers.

Working from data obtained during research into immigrant reading habits, Dali develops a theoretical framework that emphasizes the reader's "anticipated effects" from the reading experience which are built from the interaction of book-related appeal and reader driven-appeal elements. This model emphasizes that appeal elements "are not static qualities of reading materials but an integral part of the reading experience and the reading process," which serve to move the reader through the process of selecting for and then assessing the successful accomplishment of an anticipated effect from the reading experience, from pre-reading to reading proper to post-reading. Similarly, Ross stressed that book selection is not a single choice but a series of choices including, but not limited to, deciding to read as opposed to engaging in other activities, selecting particular materials based on a variety of criteria and factors that are suitable to bringing home for ready access, and deciding to read one available text over any other (Ross, 2000). Simply having the opportunity to engage in making these choices may be an essential, motivational part of the book selection process for some committed readers, and the fact that committed readers consistently relate that they are satisfied with their own selection strategies is "likely to be both a result and a cause of their prolonged and continued engagement in reading" (Ross, 2000, p. 10). Further research into the temporal aspects of the book selection process, including the impact of success or failure on later reading experiences, is an area of LIS research that is very much needed for better understanding how RA is to lead to successful outcomes. In another article, Dali further stresses the need to bring "a contextually grounded approach to gathering information about

appeal – rather than a keyword-oriented approach more suitable for information retrieval and reference questions" and suggests that future LIS research needs to build on interdisciplinary research on the reading experience (Dali, 2013, p. 497).

Earlier in this essay it was suggested that there was a need in LIS research and RA practice to focus less on what we read in favour of exploring of why we read as a way of exploring how book selection plays into the wider reading experience. The reason for this shift is apparent when considering how the literacies involved in book selection have been illuminated by LIS research that has focused on the questions of why we read, not just in terms of selecting fiction novels for leisure reading, but in terms of how we engage in all reading practices. A similar call to arms comes from Duncan Smith who in1996 argued that "librarians must shift their focus, which has traditionally been on reference sources and the contents of books to the reader, the reader's experience and the advisor's understanding of that experience" (1996, p. 51). A tantalizing clue as to why it might be that this remains an issue today can be found in the much later article by David Beard and Kate Vo Thi-Beard, which makes a similar argument yet includes the following statement: "RA is an organic extension of the array of reference services already offered in the library" (2008, p. 332). That this connection of these types of library services remains so ingrained in library literature indicates a quietly consistent traditional strain of library service models which includes an assumption that the same kind of librarian-guided search methods and specialized tools can be employed in both situations into the foreseeable future. Of course library service models are changing quickly and dramatically making it all the more critical that there is an understanding of the underlying value of a service and the real impact of our service models upon our patrons. If indeed RA is to survive and thrive into future iterations of public library practice, then it is essential that we push the existing materials focused model of book appeal into a more nuanced and reader-focused model.

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