



## Readers Advisory A Community Effort?

Steven M. Cohen

In this issue, we celebrate readers advisory, that ubiquitous service that permeates all public libraries. This column addresses numerous online resources (from librarians and otherwise) dealing with readers advisory issues. In addition, I hypothesize about the possibilities of providing readers advisory service via the library OPACs using patron records. Online resources for readers advisory services abound. Libraries have set up databases and portals on their Web sites that assist patrons in selecting what books to read. For example, the Hennepin County (Minn.) Library System has created Find a Good Book ([www.hclib.org/pub/books/iyl](http://www.hclib.org/pub/books/iyl)), where the user can search for an author, title, or, more importantly, book theme. The Montgomery County (Md.) Public Libraries have built the Readers' Café ([www.montgomerycountymd.gov/apps/libraries/readerscafe](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/apps/libraries/readerscafe)), a virtual meeting place for books and readers.

Fiction\_L ([www.webrary.org/rs/FLbklistmenu.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/FLbklistmenu.html)) is one of the more popular electronic discussion lists for public librarians. It deals mostly with readers advisory issues, but also assists in reference work in locating that hard-to-find book, collection development issues, and book lists. Fiction\_L is hosted by the Morton Grove (Ill.) Public Library ([www.webrary.org](http://www.webrary.org)), and two resources are available on the site, besides the obvious one of providing information about how to subscribe and unsubscribe to the mailing list.

First, users can search the Fiction\_L archives of the posts or browse by year ([www.webrary.org/rs/FLarchive.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/FLarchive.html)). Second, and more impressive, are the Fiction\_L book list pages ([www.webrary.org/rs/FLbklistmenu.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/FLbklistmenu.html)), which are the direct results of the discussions that went on in the mailing list. In other words, lists were built on the suggestions made from the contributors to the list. The lists are divided into seven categories: genre, character, setting, subject, audience, author, and miscellaneous. Each list has a date (month and year) attached to it. This is important, as new books may have been published that fit in a particular book list. One would hope that outdated book lists would be updated, but this doesn't seem to be the case. Once a book list is established, it seems to remain stagnant.

Another good readers advisory resource is The Reader's Robot ([www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/rr.html](http://www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/rr.html)), a readers advisory tool that holds more than 5,500 books in twenty-one different genres. The Reader's Robot is provided by the Thomson-Niccola Regional District Library System ([www.tnrndlib.bc.ca](http://www.tnrndlib.bc.ca)) in

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Internet Spotlight explores Internet and Web topics relevant to librarians in the public library sector.

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British Columbia, Canada. There are many aspects to this resource that are worth perusing, including two search mechanisms and a reading list creator. The first search database, The RR Search Engine ([www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-search.pl](http://www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-search.pl)) allows the user to choose one or more of the twenty-one genres, search by one or more keywords, use the Boolean operators "and" and "or," and have wildcard endings or exact matches. The second, and more impressive, search feature is an "appeal" search ([www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-searchappeal.pl](http://www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-searchappeal.pl)). The user can choose between eight of the genres (I'm not sure why all twenty-one genres are not available) and pull up a question-and-answer section on numerous aspects of fiction. The questions range from the simple (the length of the book and the social class of the characters), to the more complex (the style of the author, how the book leaves the reader feeling). After the fifteen questions are answered, the engine will produce a list of books that fit the criteria from the fifteen questions. The Instant List Section ([www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/il-menu.html](http://www.tnrndlib.bc.ca/il-menu.html)) allows the user to view certain lists that have already been created by the creators of the site. And, browsing the collection is always available.

One of the more interesting book selection tools that has been online for a few years is Which Book ([www.whichbook.net](http://www.whichbook.net)). What makes this site interesting is that the user has almost total control of the type of books that get presented. This is done by rating the types of books wanted by using more or less criteria to the desired level of twelve categories. For example, the first criteria are happy and sad. One can choose books that are more happy than sad on different percentage levels. If a purely sad book is wanted, then move the arrow all the way to the left. If a semi-sad theme is needed, then move the arrow only a little bit toward the sad side. If no preference is needed, then keep it in the middle. The user can do this for all twelve categories. One would think that this method of choosing books to read would be the most comprehensive for the online environment (nothing beats the face-to-face discussions with a librarian when readers advisory is on the table) as it allows the user to choose the intensity of many types of book personalities. This is a wonderful resource.

While librarians may not be fond of Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com, they have many sections that libraries can learn from, including those on book suggestions. While this can't be categorized as true readers advisory since they are not assisting in the book selection process, the information provided by these online bookstores can assist the reader in determining whether or not to read a particular book. Both Amazon and Barnes and Noble offer reviews by the press as well as by thousands of readers who take the time to send in their thoughts about the books.

For example, I picked a book that I recently finished, titled *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki (Doubleday, 2004), and looked at its pages in Amazon and Barnes and Noble. On Amazon (<http://tinyurl.com/69rag>), the first "readers advisory" suggestion that I see is "people who have bought this book also bought . . .," which lists five books, only one of which I might read based on the title alone. Then Amazon has

a section called "Customer's Advice" that recommends books in addition to, or instead of, *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Then come the lengthy reviews by professional journals and Amazon customers. Last, one can browse similar books based on the subject headings that Amazon suggests. Barnes and Noble has similar functions.

While many believe that Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble have been less than stellar in the book suggestion department, I can only guess that most of the patrons who don't access the public library go to Amazon first. In fact, I would even bet that some patrons who regularly use the library go to these top online bookstores for book suggestions.

## Ideas for Library Online Readers Advisory

Putting Amazon's and Barnes and Noble's practices to use in library catalogs would not be difficult. Instead of "people who bought this book also bought . . .," each record could contain links to the catalog record of "people who checked this book out also checked out . . ." (if such information is stored). There is no breach of privacy here, just anonymous advisories by readers with similar interests. In fact, this collective wisdom could not only work within the library, but consortia could take all of the patrons' checkout records in the regional, county, or even state networks and build a mechanism by which thousands of library patrons are recommending books to one another, anonymously. And imagine what could happen if OCLC worked with this data to build an international system.

I know, first things first. Vendors will have to communicate with one another, and patrons may be a bit skeptical of letting out their reading lists (albeit anonymously). But on a purely sociological framework, this theory works. Collectively, who better to recommend books to each other than the entire community of library users?

Of course, there are other ways in which to incorporate readers advisory into the library OPAC. I have always thought that library OPACs should have sections where library patrons could participate in book suggestions when a title is retrieved from the system. It could be called "Recommended books from your community members." While there are many inherent problems with this idea (nonsensical or political opinions expressed by patrons or obscene language), I'm sure that the benefits would outweigh the costs. In fact, there could be administrative control as to who can post. Perhaps a committee of community members could be formed to write and post reviews.

If the library wants to have book recommendations by librarians, a link to other books chosen by subject specialists can be displayed when a book title or author list is called up. Imagine a link titled "Your librarians recommend" within the OPAC. There may also be a way to incorporate the aforementioned Which Book into the library catalog. The patron accesses a title in the catalog and the record is displayed, hopefully with some sort of book synopsis (most OPAC vendors have already included this feature in their software). After the synopsis, the Which Book chart could be displayed and the reader could manipulate the more or less schema, with the final result of suggested books with direct links to the catalog record.

In an article in *Library Journal* titled "Taking Back Reader's Advisory" ([www.libraryjournal.com/index.asp?layout="](http://www.libraryjournal.com/index.asp?layout=)

articleArchive&articleid=CA317643), Barbara Hoffert lists several useful methods for bringing readers advisory back into the library, including by using remote library services such as online chat for book discussion and by creating better annotated lists on our library Web sites.<sup>1</sup> There was no discussion, however, of incorporating readers advisory into the library OPAC, which is probably the most popular part of the library's Web page as well as the most often accessed software within the library. Why shouldn't we use it to assist our patrons in choosing the best books for their wants and needs?

I believe there can be a place for both librarians and the community to provide readers advisories to patrons. While librarians do have expertise in readers advisory, utilizing the collective wisdom of a user base can increase the likelihood that a patron seeking advice for future reading will be satisfied. The trick is finding the best ways to incorporate this collective wisdom. This is where, I believe, the library can step in and thrive. ■



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Steven is currently reading *Status Anxiety* by Alain de Botton ([www.alaindebotton.com/status.htm](http://www.alaindebotton.com/status.htm)), a brilliant, readable account of the struggles about how people see us, both sociologically and psychologically, and *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations* by James Surowiecki ([www.wisdomofcrowds.com](http://www.wisdomofcrowds.com)), which argues that, under the right circumstances (laid out step by step in each chapter), collective work is better than the results of the smartest individuals within any particular group.

## Reference

1. Barbara Hoffert, "Taking Back Reader's Advisory," *Library Journal*. Accessed Oct. 10, 2004, [www.libraryjournal.com/index.asp?layout=articleArchive&articleid=CA317643](http://www.libraryjournal.com/index.asp?layout=articleArchive&articleid=CA317643).

## Resources

- Hennepin County Library System, "Find a Good Book," [www.hclib.org/pub/books/iyl](http://www.hclib.org/pub/books/iyl)
- Montgomery County Public Libraries Readers Café, [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/apps/libraries/readerscafe/index.asp](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/apps/libraries/readerscafe/index.asp)
- Fiction-L, [www.webrary.org/rs/FLmenu.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/FLmenu.html)
- Morton Grove (Ill.) Public Library, [www.webrary.org](http://www.webrary.org)
- Fiction-L Archives, [www.webrary.org/rs/FLarchive.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/FLarchive.html)
- Fiction-L Booklist, [www.webrary.org/rs/FLbklistmenu.html](http://www.webrary.org/rs/FLbklistmenu.html)
- Thomson—Niccola Regional District Library System in Canada, [www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/index.shtml](http://www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/index.shtml)
- Reader Robot Search Engine, [www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-search.pl](http://www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-search.pl)
- Reader Robot "appeal" Search, [www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-search-appeal.pl](http://www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/cgi-bin/rr-search-appeal.pl)
- Readers Robot Instant List Section, [www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/il-menu.html](http://www.tnrldlib.bc.ca/il-menu.html)
- Which Book, [www.whichbook.net](http://www.whichbook.net)
- Amazon, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)
- Barnes & Noble, [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com)
- Amazon Page for "Wisdom of Crowds," <http://tinyurl.com/69rag>
- BN Page for "Wisdom of Crowds," <http://tinyurl.com/419zg>

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