
This study describes a set of interviews with four professional readers’ advisory librarians pertaining to a selected set of titles from American Library Association (ALA) reading lists and the associated reading recommendations given by five online readers’ advisory databases, including Books and Authors, Fiction/Non-Fiction Connection, LibraryThing, NoveList, and Reader’s Advisor Online. The interviews were conducted to determine the relevance of reading recommendations, which online readers’ advisory database returned the most relevant reading recommendations, and what criteria librarians use when determining relevance of reading recommendations. One interesting outcome of the study indicated the importance of book’s appeal, or the way a book makes a reader feel, when creating reading recommendations.

Headings:

Reader guidance -- Evaluation

Library science -- Internet resources

Internet/Public libraries
EFFECTIVENESS OF READERS’ ADVISORY ELECTRONIC DATABASES AT RETURNING RELEVANT READERS’ ADVISORY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR READERS’ ADVISORY LIBRARIANS

by
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A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

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Introduction

Readers’ advisory is defined as “a patron-oriented library service for adult leisure readers” (Saricks, 2005, p.1). A “connection between reader and librarian is at the heart of readers’ advisory services” (Moyer, 2008, p.2). Providing readers’ advisory services to patrons is an important part of librarianship, as well as providing patrons with a way of finding books on their own. So how do we provide patrons with recommendations, even when we aren’t familiar with titles or are short on time?

Readers’ advisory began in the 1870s and has endured many changes over the years (Dilevko, 2007, p.53). From readers’ advisory resources (of which we have many), to the way services are provided (readers’ advisory is now available online), the field of readers’ advisory is constantly changing and adapting to the needs of the public. Readers’ advisory not only covers fiction, but also includes nonfiction, audio, and video materials (Saricks, 2005). Many librarians use online readers’ advisory electronic databases as an aid to providing reading recommendations for patrons.

There are several electronic readers’ advisory databases marketed to libraries, including NoveList, Books and Authors, Bowker’s Fiction Connection and Bowker’s Non-Fiction Connection, Reader’s Advisor Online, and the social networking site, Library Thing, which offers Library Thing for Libraries. Each electronic database provides reading recommendations when a book is searched in the database. This study will provide background on these various readers’ advisory databases and how effective
readers’ advisory electronic databases are at returning relevant recommendations for readers’ advisory librarians. The scope of this study includes readers’ advisory databases and social networking sites marketed directly to libraries. While librarians may consult them as well, sites such as Amazon.com and goodreads were not included because they aren’t marketed directly to libraries.
Readers’ Advisory Services

Books and Authors

*Books and Authors* is an online database created in 2008 that pulls information from Gale’s *What do I read next?* book series. So far, it contains more than 146,000 fiction titles and 40,000 nonfiction titles. *Books and Authors* also contains 54,000 authors. *Books and Authors* provides “book suggestions from experts, titles, biographies, and more” (Books and Authors, 2009). All books in the *Books and Authors* database are “recommended by librarians or other experts” (Books and Authors, 2009).

Fiction/Non-Fiction Connection

Bowker’s *Fiction Connection* and *Non-Fiction Connection* readers’ advisory databases currently date back to 1997, with older titles added to “improve coverage” (FAQs, 2010). Both databases are updated monthly, and titles are added as they are printed in popular review sources. Data in *Fiction Connection* is pulled from “fiction profiles developed by Syndetic Solutions, which identify key traits and characteristics that define a particular title” (Fiction Connection, 2010). In 2005, children’s and young adult titles were also added to *Fiction Connection* (FAQs, 2010). Out of print titles are included in both databases, as libraries may have “out of print titles on their shelves that their patrons might still be interested in” (FAQs, 2010).

LibraryThing
*LibraryThing* is an online cataloging tool, social networking site, and readers’ advisory database created by Tim Spalding, that went “live” in 2005 and is based in Portland, Maine (About LibraryThing, 2010). Book recommendations are made based on users’ “libraries”, or collections of books on *LibraryThing* and those of other libraries. *LibraryThing* currently has over 1 million users, with more than 48 million books in the database and over 60 million user-generated tags for metadata (About LibraryThing, 2010). The book recommending feature, the “suggested” feature, was introduced in 2006 (About LibraryThing, 2010). Book recommendations are divided into *LibraryThing* recommendations, user recommendations, and special recommendations, which include “People with this book also have…” for more common and obscure titles (About LibraryThing, 2010).

**NoveList**

*NoveList* was founded by Duncan Smith, Roger Rohweder, and John Strickler in 1990 to “increase librarians’ effectiveness for reader’s advisory” (About NoveList, 2009). The first copy of *NoveList* was sold in 1994. EBSCO Publishing purchased NoveList in 1999 and in 2000 *NoveList* became a “data creator” instead of simply aggregating data, creating its own content (About NoveList, 2009). In March 2008 *NoveList Plus* launched, adding nonfiction titles to the database. *NoveList Select*, a recommendation engine that is integrated into OPACs, was launched in 2009. Currently, *NoveList* has more than 150,000 fiction titles, 50,000 nonfiction titles, and over 4,000 “custom created articles and lists”, which are staff and expert-created articles and lists with book recommendations, themed articles, and author read-alikes (About NoveList, 2009).

**Reader’s Advisor Online**
Reader’s Advisor Online consists of a readers’ advisory database and a free blog and is published by Libraries Unlimited. Reader’s Advisor Online is based on the Libraries Unlimited series of books, Genreflecting, and includes all volumes. Selected essays from The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion and Nonfiction Readers’ Advisory are also included. Reader’s Advisor Online is updated monthly and contains advice from “top reader’s advisory experts” (Product Info, 2010).
Glossary: below are defined some terms used in the literature review:

**Expert content:** Content created by librarians and professionals in the field of readers’ advisory

**Folksonomy:** Creating tags (or terms) to define and organize information or content

**Social bookmarking:** The ability for users to “bookmark” links to information and resources they like and share these links with others

**Social tagging:** The ability for users to add their own terms, or “tags” to resources

**Tag clouds:** A collection of user-created “tags” or terms from a website

**User-generated content:** Content created by users of a site

Community efforts/Social tagging and readers’ advisory

Social tagging and user-generated content has been making its way into OPACs, giving patrons access to user recommendations, tag clouds, and user reviews, along with “expert content” already contained in the OPAC. Cohen “addresses social tagging as covering more aspects of a book or resource than LC subject headings may have” (Cohen, 2005, p. 34). Social sites such as Library Thing also provide a way to see what other users are reading with similar interests, instead of what librarians or experts are recommending (Cohen, 2005, p. 34). Allowing users more control and access to content encourage collaboration and contribution, which in turn provides more information.
With Library Thing for Libraries, user-generated content is available in the OPAC, but users can also find other users with whom they have common reading interests to connect and discuss. With users and librarians all able to participate in reading recommendations, more suggestions will be available and patrons are more likely to be satisfied with the recommendations (Cohen, 2005, p. 25). OPACs provide an outlet for this “collective wisdom” in a very discoverable place for patrons (Cohen, 2005, p. 25).

Various social tagging projects outside the field of library science also provide a “model for readers’ advisory” (Wyatt, 2009, p. 39). Museums have launched “Project Steve”, a social tagging project for tagging individual art and art collections to find differences between the way users search for objects and the way museums have cataloged them. Social tagging for libraries would provide a “visitor’s view”, allowing libraries to see what content is important to patrons and not only what content belongs in library catalog records (Wyatt, 2009, p. 40). Thus, social tagging will enable patrons to access materials that, previously, they would not have come across. Also, Project Steve is working on producing “see-also” cross connections for synonyms. In social tagging for libraries, this would be a folksonomy with capabilities similar to what is currently used in library subject authorities (Wyatt, 2009, p. 40). Social tagging also allows for appeals, such as pace, tone, and setting to be entered, which LC doesn’t account for, providing yet another access point for readers’ advisory recommendations.

**Online Readers’ Advisory: Libraries**

Along with databases, chat and email readers’ advisory is a service frequently provided by libraries, as is digital reference. However, “readers’ advisory service is almost invisible in the literature regarding digital reference” (Trott, 2005, p. 211). Online
readers’ advisory is often considered to be a part of digital reference. There are two types of online readers’ advisory provided by libraries: chat and email-based recommendations. Chat readers’ advisory is more anonymous, making patrons more likely to request controversial or potentially embarrassing subject matter (Trott, 2005, p. 212). Often, chat readers’ advisory is more visible than traditional readers’ advisory, with links to “finding a good book”, and therefore is very important in both marketing the library and assisting patrons (Trott, 2005, p. 212). Although in chat readers’ advisory patrons are not directly accessing readers’ advisory databases, many librarians use these databases as a quick reference for finding materials to recommend (Trott, 2005, p. 213). Real time chat is a way of providing information without getting into back and forth emails with patrons (Wilson, 2001, p. 345).

Email readers’ advisory is also an important part of recommendations. These lists tend to be longer and more complete, as they are not as “on the spot”, or require an immediate response, as chat readers’ advisory is (Trott, 2005, p. 214). Email readers’ advisory also has a format similar to what readers’ advisory databases are using: a “form that allows readers to choose between a variety of appeal characteristics, or to rate them on a sliding scale”, allowing readers to “express their thoughts more coherently” (Trott, 2005, p. 214). Readers’ advisory databases allow readers to choose from a variety of headings. For example, subject and genre headings to select the most important parts of the book that would be important in other recommended materials are available. The more specific readers are, both in email readers’ advisory and with readers’ advisory databases, the more likely recommended materials will be to match what the reader likes.

**Online Readers’ Advisory: Databases**
There are many different readers’ advisory book recommendation databases, each with different approaches to recommendations. Most tend to focus on topics, themes, appeals, and subjects as selection tools for recommendations. Percentage rankings for these factors are another way of selecting book recommendations, for example how much sadness a book contains (Cohen, 2005, p. 24). Creating databases with more access points, such as appeals and the ability to adjust how much of something readers like in a book is another step towards truly customizing a readers’ advisory database to the reader (Wyatt, 2009, p. 39).

Libraries Unlimited’s **Reader’s Advisor Online** provides a blog and searching by genre, series, reading interest, description, and other appeals for books. Series information is available to readers and annotations are provided to recommend titles to readers (LaGuardia, 2007, O’Brien, 2009, Stipek, 2007). Genres are broken into subgenres, allowing readers to continue narrowing searches until they find exactly what they want (Stipek, 2007, p. 156). Award winning books, from major fiction and nonfiction awards are also available, as they are in other databases, as well as other search categories. Reader’s Advisor Online is updated monthly with new titles and information (O’Brien, 2009, p. 264).

Bowker publishes **Fiction Connection** as well as **Nonfiction Connection**, two databases that are able to be searched at the same time by similar criteria to Reader’s Advisor Online (Bowker announces non-fiction connection, 2007). Book summaries, covers, excerpts, and articles from various media about the book are provided as well (Fiction Connection, 2010). Bowker’s Fiction Connection also allows users to search by
characters in books by occupation, gender, and age range (Fiction Connection, 2010). Setting is also searchable in Fiction Connection, for example (Fiction Connection, 2010).

Publisher Gale produces Books & Authors, the replacement for Gale’s “What Do I Read Next?” database (Brisco, 2009, p. 67). Books & Authors not only provides recommendations by expert staff, but allows user-generated lists, reviews, and rankings (Brisco, 2009, p. 68). Social bookmarking is used in Books & Authors and searching and browsing can be done in numerous ways (Brisco, 2009, p. 67). There is also a “read-alike wizard”, which allows users to select from a variety of tags to find a book similar to the one a user likes (Quinn, 2008, p. 78).

NoveList Plus is both a fiction and nonfiction database, providing expert content but allowing user-generated content as well. NoveList is updated weekly (O’Brien, 2009, p. 264). Read-alike lists are provided from experts in the field of readers’ advisory and genre worksheets to bring readers’ advisors up to speed on genres, as well as reading lists and readers’ advisor training materials are available (O’Brien, 2009). Book discussion guides are also provided (O’Brien, 2009, p. 266).

In comparison with library-focused readers’ advisory databases, resources such as Amazon.com rely on buying statistics and history, as well as some book reviews from various sources for recommendations rather than preference and appeal of a book (Tenopir, 2006, p. 29). It is updated every time a book is purchased (Tenopir, 2006, p. 29). This is not based on expert opinion and can lead to odd recommendations not always completely relevant to the book in question. Library-focused databases are meeting the needs of users by providing recommendations from one title directly to another title.
Methodology

The purpose of this research is to determine the relevance of reading recommendations given by five online readers’ advisory databases, discover which online readers’ advisory database returned the most relevant reading recommendations, and what criteria librarians use when determining the relevance of reading recommendations. The following research questions drove this study:

- Are all recommendations equally relevant (for each book)?
- How is relevancy determined (for reading recommendations)?
- Does prior knowledge or lack of knowledge of a book influence opinion of reading recommendations?

A list of possible participants was created with experts in the field that had either published books on readers’ advisory, contributed to various readers’ advisory databases, or both. Potential participants were then contacted by email and asked to participate in the study (See Appendix A). Four of the first five participants were willing to participate, providing the participants needed for this study.

The four participants in the study were emailed a packet of information, containing five “test titles”, titles selected from the 2008 Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Reading List and the 2008 ALA Notable Books reading list and reading recommendations associated with each “test title” from each of the electronic readers’ advisory databases listed below:
The “test titles” and reading recommendation titles included information on author, title, publication information, and a brief summary of the book. The reading recommendations had any information that could possibly identify the database providing the recommendation removed, to prevent database bias on the part of participants, although reading recommendations from each database were grouped together for the participants to reference each database’s recommendations as a whole (See Appendix B, C).

After receiving the packet of “test titles” and associated reading recommendations, participants were asked to analyze the reading recommendations for relevance, or how effectively the reading recommendations match the selected “test title”. A second email was sent to schedule a one hour phone interview with participants. The purpose of the interview was to determine the relevance of reading recommendations, which online readers’ advisory database returned the most relevant reading recommendations, and what criteria librarians use when determining the relevance of reading recommendations.

The phone interviews lasted one hour each. Participants were asked about the relevance of each reading recommendation in regards to the “test title”. Participants were also asked what strategies were used in evaluating the relevance of reading recommendations. Participants were then asked which group of reading recommendations was most effective at returning relevant reading recommendations (See Appendix D).

**Significance of study**
Although each database provides different recommendations, the findings of this study provide information on the various databases’ reading recommendations from an expert point of view. These databases are proprietary, and through competition, these expert opinions may encourage changes or better ways of recommending titles for database creators. The results of this study also shed light on the techniques and strategies readers’ advisory librarians employ when using electronic readers’ advisory databases to search for recommended titles for patrons. Evaluative techniques were also examined, on how experts in the field of readers’ advisory evaluate reading recommendations for relevance.
Discussion

The four readers’ advisory librarians interviewed all had very different views and opinions on which database provided the most relevant recommendations, however, their strategy and reasoning behind what makes a good recommendation was very similar. All librarians expressed that in their professional lives their recommendations come from the feel of a book, the books appeal based on tone, character focus and development, plot, and language, storyline, pace, and writing style. All four librarians also expressed that all of the lists containing returned recommendations from the readers’ advisory databases had a focus on subject, oftentimes missing the tone or overall feel of the book. Although each of the recommendation lists returned some relevant books for each “test title”, the librarians were all able to point out titles that seemed to simply be subject or genre matches, such as an entire list of memoirs for *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver, or entirely food-related results. Another example of a subject-oriented list was for recommended titles for *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* by Michael Chabon. Although this title contains mystery, recommendations returned were Ridley Pearson and Craig Johnson, which one librarian stated of the “test title”, “it’s not that kind of a mystery” (Librarian 1 interview). These very computer-generated reading recommendations containing mostly subject-oriented recommendations and not using appeal led one librarian to say, “The problem a database has is that they’re not really built around appeal yet, they’re built around subject headings, time periods, and then you get
these sort of weird matches” and “if you don’t know the book and you just sort of print a list and say you might enjoy some of these books, then you’re really doing a disservice to the reader, because the list is not helping you” (Librarian 2 interview). The need for appeal factors in databases to prevent these subject-oriented lists and “weird matches” was stressed by the librarians, as well as the fact that databases should be using appeal factors. Reader’s Advisor Online, which contains content generated from the Libraries Unlimited series *Genreflecting* could transition their data to contain appeal, but hasn’t “carried appeal forward”, according to Librarian 2.

Almost all of the librarians interviewed also expressed the feeling that the databases were breaking some “cardinal rules” for reading recommendation lists. Repeating authors more than once on a list and recommending more titles by the author of the main title on the list were viewed as “cheating” by many of the librarians, and the librarians felt that patrons would be led in the direction of more books by the same authors on their own without recommendations as an unspoken way of finding similar books. Librarian 4 felt that many of the lists were “author-centric”. In some cases, such as *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, recommending more titles by Michael Chabon was expressed as “okay” by Librarian 3, as people who like this specific Chabon book are likely to enjoy more of his books, although Librarian 3 wasn’t sure these recommendations were “necessary”. Overall, the librarians felt that readers could guide themselves toward books by the same author or more books by certain recommended authors.

Another aspect of readers’ advisory and recommending titles that most of the librarians touched on while being interviewed about these five electronic databases is the
idea of mixing genres. For several of the “test titles” in specific genres, reading recommendations would come from the romance aspect of a book, for example, or the mystery aspect. LibraryThing actually recommended a young adult title, *Julie of the Wolves* for *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*. When asking the librarians about whether or not the recommend books from different genres, most of them would, but felt these books in particular were “off” in some way or missing something crucial that would appeal to readers of the “test title”. Librarian 3 expressed that the “idea that something maybe takes you in a lot of different directions” is a good idea, though not to the exclusion of books that “hit on a lot of the major points of a book”. It is important to stretch to books that a reader wouldn’t find on his/her own, but not to stretch so far that no connection is made. In the words of Librarian 3, “most things should be pretty close to the original book”. However, most of the librarians expressed a preference for lists that went in “many directions”, rather than sticking with a particular theme or subject. Recommending books for different types of reasons instead of for one reason alone was very important to the librarians interviewed.

In this respect, half of the librarians interviewed felt that some sort of annotations on the titles and why they were recommended for the “test title” should be included. Librarian 1 felt that “oftentimes the annotations are not helpful, particularly” when “readers are looking for certain keywords in the annotation or in the longer reviews that are going to give them a sense of the book”. A sense of the book is important for recommending titles, and annotations that are included often do not touch on appeal factors, but focus mostly on summary of the book, which all librarians interviewed deemed unhelpful. Librarian 3 felt that “these are the sorts of lists that need to be
annotated”, because, as librarians we are making “comparisons and inferences and […]
trying to provide more information very quickly that says, ‘if you liked this aspect of it,
here’s a good book for you’”; annotations would help make it clear to readers why the
books that are recommended are being recommended and to help pinpoint what books
would best fit the reader’s interest in the book. Librarian 3 believes that annotations will
help “make the list at least somewhat more accurate for the user”, although these
databases are all online, so “presumably you can click through and get more information
right away”. The overall feeling that Librarians 1 and 3 have is that annotations help to
capture the various aspects of a book and should not only be used for summary.

Librarians 1 and 3 also discussed their use of electronic readers’ advisory
databases. Both librarians use them more for identifying a book, remembering a title for
example, rather than creating lists. Librarian 1 doesn’t feel that the electronic databases
“capture the heart or the essence of the books” and uses them more for subjects and
summaries. Librarian 3 uses the databases for “mnemonic devices” and also for book
identification when creating lists. Librarian 3 expressed frustration that “regular users or
library school students for that matter” will look at these databases and say “it
recommended this and I didn’t like it”. Librarian 3 believes that “it’s a machine” that
gives “better than even odds” and it is up the librarian to do the work and figure out what
titles are good matches. All of these librarians had an idea of what books would be
relevant for these test titles and none of them simply rely on these “machines” alone to
return reading recommendations for their users.
Conclusions

Overall, none of the librarians felt that any of the databases returned entirely relevant results. Librarian 3 felt that all of these lists combined was a good start to “assembling a really good list” from the results. All of the librarians interviewed had some idea of books that they felt should be recommended, and several librarians noted their surprise at not finding these recommendations from any of the databases. For example, two of the librarians felt that *My Jim* by Nancy Rawles and the original *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain were both a natural fit for *Finn* by John Clinch, and that those lists that didn’t include *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* were fundamentally lacking something. Also, half of the librarians interviewed felt that, when recommending books for *Natural born charmer* by Susan Elizabeth Phillips, Jennifer Crusie was a natural recommendation. Some of the titles recommended Crusie, but Crusie books that weren’t the best match, and some of the lists did not contain her, again leading librarians to feel that something was missing. Some of the recommendations were simply wrong in the eyes of the librarians interviewed. Librarian 3 pointed out that “when you see a list and you see things that are really bad on it, it kind of casts the whole list into doubt” and if librarians or readers didn’t know that some of the recommendations were good, they probably wouldn’t think that they were, “because the next one was a bad one”. If librarians and users can identify a bad title in a mix of good titles, the entire list may be ignored, doing a disservice to readers. In general, the librarians were not
overwhelmingly impressed with one database over the other and expressed the need for changes to the databases. They thought the use of appeal vocabulary, or why readers would want to read this book should be included. Simple summaries of books in electronic readers’ advisory databases with subject headings attached are no longer enough. The next step in the world of electronic readers’ advisory databases is using appeal vocabulary and explaining the process behind recommendations. Hopefully, future researchers will provide research on appeal factors that are most helpful in readers’ advisory and make recommendations for what appeal factors electronic readers’ advisory databases should be using.
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Appendix A

Participant recruiting email

Dear Colleague,

My name is Danielle Allison and I am a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the School of Information and Library Science. I am conducting a study on electronic readers’ advisory databases and the reading recommendations that are returned with selected titles. I am asking four experts in the field of readers’ advisory to evaluate reading recommendations returned from five electronic databases using selected titles and would like to ask you to be a participant. Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Participating in the study would require receiving an email containing 5 selected “test titles”, or titles pulled from the 2008 RUSA Reading List and the 2008 ALA Notable Books List, along with a selection of reading recommendations in groups. You will be asked to evaluate these reading recommendations for relevancy, both individually related to the title, and groups. You will then be asked to participate in a one hour phone interview to discuss your evaluations and the strategies and criteria used to evaluate these recommendations. The evaluation of “test titles” should take no more than 1 to 1 ½ hours and should be completed prior to the interview.

Should you choose to participate, you will be emailed a Word document containing the test titles and recommendations to evaluate. You will be contacted again through email to schedule a phone interview and will be asked to provide a contact phone number for the interview. Telephone interviews will be tape recorded and later transcribed for research purposes. Following the interview all identifying information will be erased from tapes and transcriptions.

Should you participate in this study, no risks nor benefits are anticipated with your participation. However, there will be professional benefit from this study, as this information will provide information on the techniques used to evaluate reading recommendations, as well as which database is most effective at providing relevant reading recommendations. There is no cost to you or financial benefit for your participation.

You may contact me with any questions at (919) 649-6423 or by email: dmwiley@email.unc.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Claudia Gollop,
PhD, at (919) 962-8362 or gollop@ils.unc.edu. All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

Thank you for considering participation in this study. I hope that I can share your views with the greater professional community and use your response to help shape recommendations for electronic readers’ advisory databases.

Sincerely,

Danielle Allison
Appendix B

“Test titles” and associated reading recommendations: sample

Test title 1:

This entertaining account of a family’s year eating only locally produced food presents both serious and humorous facts and anecdotes about nutrition, agribusiness, and food production.

List 1:


List 2:


Appendix C

“Test titles” and reading recommendation summaries: sample

Test title 1:

This entertaining account of a family’s year eating only locally produced food presents both serious and humorous facts and anecdotes about nutrition, agribusiness, and food production.

List 1:


What should we have for dinner? When you can eat just about anything nature (or the supermarket) has to offer, deciding what you should eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the foods might shorten your life. Today, buffeted by one food fad after another, America is suffering from a national eating disorder. As the cornucopia of the modern American supermarket and fast food outlet confronts us with a bewildering and treacherous landscape, what's at stake becomes not only our own and our children's health, but the health of the environment that sustains life on earth. Pollan follows each of the food chains--industrial food, organic or alternative food, and food we forage ourselves--from the source to the final meal, always emphasizing our coevolutionary relationship with the handful of plant and animal species we depend on. The surprising answers Pollan offers have profound political, economic, psychological, and even moral implications for all of us.


Are we what we eat? To a degree both engrossing and alarming, the story of fast food is the story of postwar America. Though created by a handful of mavericks, the fast food industry has triggered the homogenization of our society. Fast food has hastened the malling of our landscape, widened the chasm between rich and poor, fueled an epidemic of obesity, and propelled the juggernaut of American cultural imperialism abroad. That's
a lengthy list of charges, but Eric Schlosser makes them stick with an artful mix of first-rate reportage, wry wit, and careful reasoning. Schlosser's myth-shattering survey stretches from the California subdivisions where the business was born to the industrial corridor along the New Jersey Turnpike where many of fast food's flavors are concocted. He hangs out with the teenagers who make the restaurants run and communes with those unlucky enough to hold America's most dangerous job -- meatpacker. He travels to Las Vegas for a giddily surreal franchisers' convention where Mikhail Gorbachev delivers the keynote address. He even ventures to England and Germany to clock the rate at which those countries are becoming fast food nations. Along the way, Schlosser unearths a trove of fascinating, unsettling truths -- from the unholy alliance between fast food and Hollywood to the seismic changes the industry has wrought in food production, popular culture, and even real estate. He also uncovers the fast food chains' efforts to reel in the youngest, most susceptible consumers even while they hone their institutionalized exploitation of teenagers and minorities. Schlosser then turns a critical eye toward the hot topic of globalization -- a phenomenon launched by fast food. Fast Food Nation is a groundbreaking work of investigation and cultural history that may change the way America thinks about the way it eats.


After working undercover at a slaughterhouse for an expose on meat processing, Susan Bourette resolved to go completely vegetarian. She lasted approximately five weeks. Dissatisfied with tofu and lentils, she began her quest for the perfect meat-one she could enjoy without guile.

With a reporter’s eye and a carnivore’s appetite, Bourette takes us behind the bucolic façade of the famous Blue Hill farms, on a long, hot Texas cattle drive, a whale hunt with the Inupiat, and a Canadian moose hunt, and behind the counter in a Greenwich Village butcher shop. Humorous yet authoritative, Meat: a love story, celebrates the pleasure of eating meat, as well as the lives of those who hunt, raise, and cook it- and most important, the rewards of being a compassionate carnivore.


"Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." These simple words go to the heart of food journalist Pollan's thesis. Humans used to know how to eat well, he argues, but the balanced dietary lessons that were once passed down through generations have been confused and distorted by food industry marketers, nutritional scientists, and journalists. As a result, we face today a complex culinary landscape dense with bad advice and foods that are not "real." Indeed, plain old eating is being replaced by an obsession with nutrition that is, paradoxically, ruining our health, not to mention our meals. Pollan's advice is: "Don't eat anything that your great-great grandmother would not recognize as food."
Appendix D

Telephone interview questions

Which recommendation did you find most relevant for each book? Why was it the most relevant?

Which group of recommendations did you find most relevant? (the reading recommendations are separated into groups by electronic database, but aren’t labeled) Did any in particular stand out or were there good and bad results with each?

How did you determine relevancy for the reading recommendations/what strategies did you use?

Did your prior knowledge or lack of knowledge of the book influence your opinion of the reading recommendations given?

Would it have influenced your opinion to know which database the reading recommendations were returned from?

Is there any other information that would have aided you in your decision?