PROMOTING FICTION:
READERS' ADVISORY AND THE USE OF PUBLIC LIBRARY WEB SITES

by
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<u>Introduction</u>

Over the past century, the motives and methods of readers' advisory have changed tremendously. From 1920s to the 1940s, some librarians developed sophisticated card files and conducted in-depth interviews with patrons to create personalized reading lists for educational and, sometimes, leisure purposes. With this service, librarians facilitated an early form of continuing education. During and after World War II, however, support of readers' advisory services plummeted. Many explanations have been posited for the reduction, and, in some cases, loss, of this service, as outlined by Boone (1996).

First, as Americans became employed in the war effort, the amount of leisure time available for pleasure reading and continuing education became limited. At the same time, trends in adult education started to emphasize work in groups, which made the individualized services of the readers' advisor seem obsolete. Boone also explains that poor statistics keeping on the service might also have been detrimental: as funding of libraries, in general, decreased, many libraries cut readers' advisory services because there were not adequate statistics kept to justify its continuance. Finally, and perhaps most telling, was the "growing emphasis on information and technology after World War II." The emphasis on technology persists to this day. Some in the profession see this exclusive focus on information as the underlying reason for the neglect of our fiction collections. Despite all of this, however, readers' advisory has seen a renaissance in the last twenty years. Furthermore, the recent move by some public libraries to use their homepages as a vehicle for readers' advisory services demonstrates that some systems

have been able to integrate technology and readers' advisory services into a new and powerful tool.

      This paper serves several purposes. It begins by restating the librarian's role in fiction promotion and the importance of the fiction collection to the library as a whole. As was previously mentioned, the methods of readers' advisors have changed over time; therefore, the second section will outline the ways that librarians promote the fiction in their collections today and examine the outcomes and effects of these methods. Finally, this paper focuses on the newest readers' advisory tool: the public library web page. An overview of the most useful and innovative concepts of readers' advisory services via public library web pages will be presented followed by an explanation of the implications of such a service on library staff, library patrons, and on the field of readers' advisory in general.

<u>Methodology</u>

The literature review began with a search in *Library Literature* for articles containing both of the following descriptors: Reader Guidance and Web Sites. After this query produced only one hit, a second search was conducted. The second query was a Subject (Keyword) search on Reader Guidance or Readers Advisory with a limit to English language articles. This search yielded over 70 hits. After selecting a set of these articles, the citations within those essays were used to uncover additional readings.

The survey section of this paper sought to document patterns in readers' advisory services offered via public library web sites. Therefore, this section began by examining a list of 531 library web sites entitled the Directory of United States Public Library Web Sites (http://www.capecod.net/epl/public.libraries.html). Notes were kept on patterns in service, as well as unique features of particular sites. After patterns began emerging a survey instrument was designed and a selected group of sites were fully evaluated.

In an effort to find a correlation between the quality of readers' advisory web sites and other library demographic information, the <u>American Library Directory</u> (1999/2000) was consulted. For each of the fully evaluated sites, the directory was used to obtain data on population served, staff size, and budget.

The Value of Fiction and the Librarian's Role in its Promotion

What are our contexts when we read? How does fiction fit into our lives and what of ourselves do we bring to our reading? When people discover two very different interpretations of a novel, how can we account for these contingencies in meaning? These are profound and fascinating questions that serve as a foundation for the work of the readers' advisor, work which is increasingly patron-centered rather than text-focused. It can be argued that it is not what we read but the way that we read that is most important. Once we realize the bibliotherapeutic value of books, then we begin to invest more value in our fiction collections which are often undervalued in public libraries.

Much of this neglect is due to our short-sighted focus on information and its delivery in an electronic format. Fiction has become somewhat devalued and it is the job of the librarian, through readers' advisory, to re-align him or herself with the importance of reading and literature. While some view these roles as dichotomous, a latter section will demonstrate that some libraries are successfully integrating traditional library services (readers' advisory) with technology (the public library web site).

Many in our field have written about the merits of fiction, emphasizing everything from the role of reading as a self-help tool (Chelton, 1999) to its use by readers as a way to uncover meaning in social constructs (De La Pena McCook, 1993). While these reasons for valuing fiction are abstract and theoretical, there is also a far more practical reason why we should develop and promote our fiction collections; namely, circulation.

One study by Kenneth Shearer (1998) examined North Carolina's circulation statistics for the year 1996. He discovered that 67 per cent of the total items circulated were titles from the fiction collections. While this study validates the importance of fiction circulation, Shearer added that if libraries were interested in supporting all recreational reading this percentage would be even higher, since some patrons read non-fiction for recreation as well.

Another call for fiction promotion came in the form of a letter which appeared in *Library Journal*. Editor Francine Fialkoff (1997) claimed that libraries were ignoring "the 80% of patrons who want books to come first." She argued that most patrons who come into the public library do so to find a good book, rather than look for information.

Finally, Cathleen Towey wrote an opinion piece which appeared in *American Libraries* (1997). The article called for a recommitment to readers' advisory services; in it she cites a study which found that "fiction [accounted for] 49.9% of the total annual circulation at 11 city libraries."

Studies like these are a measure of the importance of our fiction collections. If one does not view these studies as justification for the cultivation and marketing of our collections purely because patrons enjoy using them, there is a more economical reason as well. Since library budgets are tied, in part, to circulation statistics, librarians should facilitate use of the fiction collection to boost circulation statistics and justify budget increases.

In addition to the inherent value in the books themselves and the value that our patrons find in them as evidenced by circulation statistics, some librarians have recognized the value of fiction and embraced our role in its promotion. The book,

Planning and Role Setting in Public Libraries (McClure et al., 1987) outlines several legitimate roles for the public library, one of which is "Popular Materials Center." While articulating this role does, in fact, give credence to our claims that we value both fiction works and pleasure reading, it can be argued that we have a long way to go in actually supporting such a claim.

One of the primary ways that librarians can reinforce their role as "Popular Materials Center" is through readers' advisory. By providing classification of their fiction collections, by becoming more proactive in the creation of unique displays and booklists that are tailored to the interests of our particular communities, and by hosting book clubs and book talks, libraries can make connections between the right book and the right reader at the right time. An interesting survey was conducted with regard to the various roles presented in Planning and Role Setting in Public Libraries, which asked patrons to rate the importance of those roles. D'Elia and Rodger surveyed public library users in Philadelphia, Minneapolis, and Atlanta, and they found that "the data…indicate that in each of the library systems, more patrons rated the recreational role of the library (Popular Materials Center) as 'very important' than any of the other single roles" (D'Elia and Rodger, 1994).

If librarians need justification for promoting their fiction collections, the literature is full of examples. There are noble reasons (*Fiction has a therapeutic and educative value*), there are practical reasons (*Fiction is a majority of circulation in most libraries; circulation statistics are tied to budgets*) and there are dutiful reasons (*We have decided that "Popular Materials Center" and the supporting of recreational reading are legitimate roles for the public library and patrons overwhelmingly agree*). So, what are

we doing to fulfill this mission? Where is the field of readers' advisory today and where is it going?

Promoting Fiction through Readers' Advisory

To demonstrate the need for readers' advisory services, we must first understand the practices of our users. Many of those who use the fiction collection are browsers. Baker, who has written extensively in the field of readers' advisory, has outlined three characteristics of browsers:

> First, browsers directly approach the library's shelves…rather than identifying [materials] through some bibliographic tool. Second, browsers are not looking for specific documents, but rather any document which will satisfy their need. Third, because browsers come to the library without having in mind a specific title, they are open to influence from a variety of factors when selecting materials (Baker, 1986, pgs.315-316)

This last characteristic, "they are open to influence," validates the role of the readers' advisor who, through his or her displays and booklists, helps the browser navigate the thousands of titles by presenting themes, highlighting different authors, and bringing attention to connections between seemingly unrelated titles. Not only is this type of service helpful, but as Balcom (1988) has said, patrons want reading guidance from librarians. They expect worthwhile recommendations for titles. What, then, are the techniques of the readers' advisor?

Aside from the readers' advisory interview there are four strategies that have been widely used. These strategies are: displays, book lists, book clubs or book talks, and fiction classification. What follows is a brief description of each.

<u>Displays</u>

Almost all libraries have a "New Books" shelf. When an item is located there its circulation is frequently very high. Granted, this figure reflects the fact that the item has been recently acquired for the collection, but the high circulation rate is also due to the item's location in a display. Baker (1986) outlined six studies, all of which found significant increases in the circulation of displayed books. Many of these studies tested a variety of books and discovered that even older titles from the fiction collection experienced higher rates of circulation when displayed.

Increasing the circulation of older books has always been a concern of librarians who fear that once an item leaves the "New Books" shelf, it will languish among the thousands of other titles in the general fiction collection. That is why it is incumbent upon readers' advisors to, as Balcom says, "make that circulation happen… promote these books…pull them off the shelves…show their covers--make people want to read them" (1988, p.585). In addition to circulation, however, book displays serve other functions. They teach patrons about the sub-genres within a popular genre, they improve accessibility to titles by physically separating them from the rest of the collection, and they promote browsing within each of the genres (Hood, 1996, p.104).

One of the most comprehensive articles on creating a book display is Karen Litt's essay entitled "The Visual Merchandizing of Books" (1986). In it she discusses issues like the selection of themes and remembering your audience, but she also offers practical advice on lighting and graphic design. Litt's article is a concise "How-to" guide for creating displays.

While Litt's article is a good starting point on design, Long (1987) set out to measure the effectiveness of different display techniques. She found that books displayed with their covers facing outward circulated more than books displayed with only their spines facing out, proving that "the method of display, not just the display itself" increases circulation.

Maintenance is another important part of a book display. In their seminal work, Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library, Saricks and Brown outline several important maintenance issues like replenishing the display and shifting books from the bottom shelves upward where patrons are likely to look first. They also suggest removing items that sit in the display for longer than one week and maintaining twenty to thirty books in the display (1997, p.112).

Book Lists

Book lists serve many of the same functions as the display. They introduce readers to genres, sub-genres, and authors. They bring together a smaller list of titles, thus preventing the browser from having to navigate the entire fiction collection. Book lists also make connections between "works not brought together by the library's catalog or organizational scheme" (Baker, 1993, p.178). Additionally, like displays, book lists can also increase circulation of fiction titles; however, if a book list is to be effective in increasing circulation, many authors have found that the location of the list is the most important variable (Goldhor 1981, Baker 1993, Baker 1988, Hatchett 1988). In numerous studies, these authors have found that book lists displayed in highly accessible or highly

visible areas are the most effective; for example, near the front door, at the circulation desks, or as part of a book display.

Browsers like book lists, and displays, which allow them to interpret a title's inclusion in these groups as a sign of its worth or merit. If a librarian has taken the time to select and annotate an item, then the assumption that it has the librarian's approval is a fair one.

Saricks and Brown (1997) devote a section of their book to the process of creating book lists. There are sections to help advisors select topics and define the scope of their lists, as well as suggestions for the editing and printing of book lists. As with many of the other issues regarding the art of readers' advisory, this book should serve as a foundation to book list creation.

The most practical instructions for the writing of annotations, however, can be found in Baker's "Book Lists: What We Know, What We Need to Know" (1993). In it Baker spends more than half of the article teaching librarians how to write good annotations. According to the author, "The best annotations have 3 ingredients: insight into the author's work, an organized structure, and language that is powerful and evocative" (p.179).

Book Clubs and Book Talks

Book clubs can benefit both staff members and patrons. By discussing books and genres, staff members become better acquainted with their collections and, therefore, better equipped to handle readers' advisory queries. Hood has even said that allowing staff members to lead training sessions on their favorite genres "adds variety and creative

activity to the daily task of providing traditional public service" (1996, p.105).

Furthermore, book talks are the programming aspect of the readers' advisory service in

much the same way that formal, classroom bibliographic instruction sessions are the

programming of reference service. Talking to patrons about fiction is not the job of the

advisor, it is his or her duty. These programs facilitate that discussion at a level much

deeper than the readers' advisory interview does.

Meanwhile, patrons also benefit from library-sponsored book clubs because they

begin to realize that the public library is fiction-friendly and that libraries value the

readers' relationship with literature. It is through this interaction that librarians and

patrons will begin to see that the library is about more than information.

Ross (1991) offers some practical suggestions for starting a book club. Librarians

should "let readers share their enthusiasm for books…encourage discussion groups by

providing space for meetings, lists of suggested books to read…" and soliciting book

reviews and recommendations from readers and then making these available to the

public. Turning patrons' suggestions into one of the library's displays might also be an

interesting theme. One of Ross' final suggestions is to encourage staff members to read,

as this helps in the readers' advisory interviews and book discussions.

While Ross sets forth some suggestions for garnering support and getting started,

Chelton (1993) offers straightforward instructions on leading the discussions. She

recommends providing "the author's background, the book's place in his or her body of

work, any awards won," and perhaps some criticisms. She also says that it is best to

outline your presentation and then close with suggestions of other titles with similar

themes for patrons who wish to read further.

Fiction Classification

Fiction classification is a method used to delineate genres within the fiction collection. There are two main classification schemes: labeling and separation. In the first method, all of the genre fiction titles are inter-filed and labels are affixed to the spines of the books to denote a specific genre. Some libraries might use an icon like a boot with a spur to denote Westerns, while others might use a certain colored dot, or a label that simply says "Western." The other type of classification involves removing various genre titles from the fiction collection and then shelving them in another part of the library.

Baker (1988) studied the effects of these methods and found that classification (both labeling and separation) increased total circulation including the circulation of older titles. Readers who were surveyed reported that classification made book selection easier and quicker and helped them discover other authors within their genre of interest. Baker noted that the need for classification schemes becomes crucial as the size of the collection increases. This is because the likelihood that patrons will experience an overload of information increases. Information overload will be discussed at length in a later section.

Public Library Web Sites

The newest tool for the readers' advisor is the library web site. By incorporating traditional book lists with other value added services like links to external author, genre, and book award sites, some libraries have been able to integrate this technology with their readers' advisory service. In an upcoming section, these web sites will be examined in detail.

The Outcomes and Effects of Readers' Advisory Service

The underlying principle behind all of librarianship is a fairly altruistic one: librarians want to help people. All of our cataloging, bibliographic instruction, and reference interview techniques are, in fact, mediation strategies designed to help patrons navigate the numerous items in our collection and to put them in contact with the right item. The same principle holds true for readers' advisory services. When designed properly, displays, book lists, book clubs, and classification schemes are intended to connect readers with books. Their primary method for doing this is by reducing information overload.

Sharon Baker described information overload as:

The frustration and confusion that result when a person's capacity for processing information is exceeded…[for example, when] library patrons are expected to make decisions from thousands of items available for their use (Baker, 1988, p.367).

Browsers, who make up the majority of adult fiction borrowers, are especially susceptible to information overload because the nature of their browsing generally precludes their using a bibliographic tool, like an online public access catalog (OPAC), before approaching the fiction shelves (Baker, 1986, p.315). Traditional online catalogs would do little to help browsers anyway given the inadequate subject headings which are assigned to adult fiction titles. However, as was mentioned in an earlier section, browsers are open to influence and frequently seek out strategies, like displays and book lists, to cope with overload.

The success of readers' advisory techniques comes in their ability to narrow collections. For example, a book display should contain no more than thirty books. These books are usually unified under a single theme. This small set of titles is conducive to

browsing because of its size and central motif. Throughout their work, Baker (1986, 1988) and others (Rudd 1986, Chelton 1993) have called on librarians to "design and use simplification strategies" to help reduce the likelihood of information overload.

While almost all readers' advisory techniques reduce the fiction collection into discrete units that can be easily browsed, that is not necessarily the case with fiction classification. It segregates genres, which are large in their own right, often comprised of hundreds of titles. Nevertheless, patrons find this strategy serves as a type of simplification. In one survey, browsers reported that classification "made their selection easier and quicker and enabled them to become familiar with novelists in a particular genre" (Baker, 1988, p.372). Since classification reduces anxiety and increases use of the collection, it, too, reduces information overload.

When librarians devise strategies to lessen the possibility of overload, circulation rates will inevitably increase. This is another outcome of successful readers' advisory services. Goldhor (1981) found that book lists significantly affected circulation rates because of their "guidance function" leading readers to a smaller number of titles and authors. The items in this list were presumed to be recommended by the readers' advisors. As was just mentioned in the discussion of information overload, both types of classification increase circulation (Baker, 1988) because they help readers find the books they want more quickly. Classification also introduces them to other authors in the genre. Displayed books will circulate more than books not displayed (Long, 1987) because this increases the visibility and accessibility of the included titles (Baker, 1986). This type of merchandising also "focuses user interest and decreases information overload" (Chelton, 1993).

While readers' advisory services are designed to be patron-assisting measures, Hatchett (1988) has pointed out a few of the benefits that they provide for librarians as well. These services are an "inexpensive public relations tool" and they help "staff members familiarize themselves with the collection" (p.6). The author made these points in the context of an article about book lists specifically, however, the statements could easily be applied to most readers' advisory activities.

Readers' Advisory Services via Public Library Web Sites: A Survey of Trends

The delivery of readers' advisory services via public library web sites is still a relatively new phenomenon. The articles that appear in the literature regarding electronic resources and readers' advisory fall into three categories: (1) Recommendations for librarians to create their own in-house database of staff-reviewed fiction (Balcom 1988, Belcastro 1995, Soldner 1991), (2) Product reviews of fiction finders like goodreads or NoveList (Iacono, 1995), or (3) Lists of genre-based web sites, newsgroups, and listservs recommended for readers' advisors to use when creating book lists (Chelton 1993, Burgin 1996). However, there were no articles which discussed or evaluated readers' advisory services via public library web sites.

This section is not intended to draw conclusions about individual libraries, but rather to get an idea of what is happening in this emerging part of our field and to make note of patterns in this service. Libraries that offer these services today are integrating traditional service and technology, two aspects of our field which have, at times, been pitted against each other in terms of budget, staff time, and allegiance. Since neither of these aspects is likely to go away, it is imperative that we use one to improve access to the other and vice versa.

After reviewing over 530 public library web sites (Directory of U.S. Public Library Web Sites, http://www.capecod.net/epl/public.libraries.html), roughly 10% of the libraries evaluated were found to offer original readers' advisory services. For the purposes of this paper, "original" is defined as services (i.e., booklists, annotated reviews, etc.) created by the staff of the particular library or submitted by their patrons. Library web sites were omitted if they fell into one or more of the following categories:

- Offered no readers' advisory services
- Offered no original readers' advisory content, but rather linked to the original services of another library
- Only linked to external genre-based web sites or bookstores.

Of the 10% that offered readers' advisory services, there were 3 elements that began to appear on many of the web sites: genre book lists, a degree of interactivity, and lists of links to external fiction-oriented web sites.

Book lists

Every library in this set posted book lists. As we saw in previous sections book lists are an effective tool for making thematic connections between titles, for introducing readers to genres, sub-genres, and authors, and for narrowing the size of a collection and preventing overload. As more libraries begin to offer readers' advisory services on their web pages, book lists are a good place to start for several reasons. Most important, many book lists are already prepared in our libraries. A minimal amount of staff time is required to add newer titles to these book lists. Further, some of these book lists are languishing in a plastic notebook somewhere around the reference desk. This new electronic format makes use of a resource that the library has already prepared.

The electronic format also allows libraries to create new or revised book lists that take advantage of the Internet's more sophisticated graphics. Many libraries, like the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, the Salt Lake County Library System, and Morton Grove Public Library, are placing book covers alongside annotations as a way to further market the book in their online lists. Not only is this harder and more expensive to do with traditional physical book lists, but displaying a book's cover enables the library to merge the benefits of face-front book displays with book lists.

Another benefit of the library creating and posting their own book lists is that staff members can build lists that reflect the interests of their particular patron populations. This adds variety to the lists created. Some impressive, unique lists that were discovered in this evaluation included:

Fiction featuring Episcopalians (Mid-Continent Public Library)
Fiction for Genealogy Lovers (Mid-Continent Public Library)
Chest Crushers-Fiction over 600 pages (Tucson-Pima Public Library)
Computers in Fiction (Addison Public Library)
Theological Romances (Chicago Public Library)
Murder on the Menu- Suspense Novels with Recipes (Cook Memorial P.L.)
List of Books by Setting (St. Charles Public Library).

Meanwhile, some book list categories appeared on many web sites because of their universal popularity like "Staff or Patron Recommendations," "If you liked author X, then you might like author Y," and the "Most Frequently Requested" list which provided titles with the highest numbers of hold requests and was updated weekly.

Many of these lists were annotated by library staff; however, a few library sites posted patron reviews.

Interactivity

While many of the library sites were interactive, there were, of course, levels of interactivity. A couple of the libraries, Addison Public Library and Mid-Continent Public Library, offered one search box and it returned hits from the entire site; however, this device was very useful in returning specific book lists when, for example, a search by author name was conducted.

Other library readers' advisory sites contained a search option completely independent from the search box used for the entire web site. This independent search

box only ran your query against the documents contained within the readers' advisory section. Therefore, returned hits pertained to book lists, upcoming book club meetings, links to external fiction sites, and the like. However, even within this category there were differences.

At Charlotte's "Reader's Club" (http://www.readersclub.org: see appendix 3, figure 1), a sophisticated search box allows users to search by author, title, genre, and, even, reviewer name. If patrons are familiar with a staff member at their local branch who has similar reading interests, this command allows them to retrieve every review in the database written by that staff member. Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Public Library allows users to search their California File (http://dbase1.lapl.org/pages/calfic.htm: see appendix 3, figure 2) which indexes adult fiction set in California. Among the searchable fields are: locale, decade, and character name. Finally, St. Charles Public Library (http://www.st-charles.lib.il.us/low/reading.htm: see appendix 3, figure 3) allowed, not only, searching of their several hundred adult book lists exclusively, but patrons could limit their search to youth, young adult, adult book lists, or any combination of these simultaneously.

Some of the other ways that library web sites remained interactive were: patron submitted book reviews (Tinley Park, Bettendorf, and Charlotte and Mecklenburg County Public Libraries), electronic forms for submitting a readers' advisory request (Skokie, Bettendorf, and Cook Memorial Public Libraries), ballots provided to electronically vote for "Books of the Year" (Salt Lake County Library System), and an "Automatic Reserve List Option" (Addison Public Library). A patron would use this feature to ensure that

they would automatically be placed on reserve for any title that library purchases by their

favorite authors.

One library whose readers' advisory web site has a high level of interactivity is

Morton Grove Public Library. In addition to maintaining Fiction-L, a listserv devoted to

works of fiction, the library offers patrons the "Matchbook" database

(http://www.webrary.org/rs/matchbooksearch.html: see appendix 3, figure 4). This allows

patrons to select up to three subjects, genres, or formats and receive a list of the

acquisitions in those categories within the last year.

Lists of External Links

Many of the readers' advisory web sites that were reviewed featured an extensive

list of external links. As the evaluation sheets demonstrate, some of the most popular web

sites that libraries linked to involved literary awards. In some cases, libraries constructed

lists of winners for each award but sometimes they would link to external sites. In

addition to the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, many libraries listed genre-

specific awards like the Nebula (for Science Fiction), the Bram Stoker (for Horror), or the

RWAs (for Romance). Addison Public Library features an extensive list of such links in

their section on "Literary Awards" (http://www.addison.lib.il.us/6award.asp).

Many avid readers create their own web sites devoted to specific genres and

libraries are linking to these as well. These sites frequently offer the most comprehensive

information on a genre and librarians have been using them for a long time to foster

intellectual development of a genre for book lists, displays, or to help build their

collections. One of the most comprehensive lists of genre web sites can be found at Salt

Lake County Library's "Sites for Book Lovers" (http://www.slco.lib.ut.us/fiction.htm).

Finally, many library web sites are offering links to their subscription online

readers' advisory tools. These sites often require some type of security measure (for

example, entering your library card number) because these external sites are fee-based;

however, once inside the database, readers can search massive indexes by genre, author,

title, etc. Some of the evaluations revealed that the Public Library of Charlotte and

Mecklenburg County and Morton Grove Public Library linked to "NoveList," Salt Lake

County Library System linked to "What do I read next?," Hennepin County Library

linked to both services.

Comparing Demographics: The *American Library Directory* Statistics

Of the list of 55 public library web sites offering readers' advisory services, full

evaluations were conducted on 18 of these sites. (See appendix 1.) The cross-section of

libraries chosen for this evaluation was selected because their web sites contained most of

the variables studied; namely, numerous and varied genre book lists, a degree of

interactivity, and a substantial number of links. If any of these variables were absent from

the web site, its inclusion was based on its overall innovative features.

Statistics for these 18 library systems regarding the size of the population served,

the amount of each library's budget, and the size of their staff were culled from the

American Library Directory (1999/2000). (See appendix 2.)

Since only a limited number of libraries are offering readers' advisory services via

their web pages at the present moment, it is difficult to make any broad assumptions

about these statistics. However, a brief examination finds that that there was no stereotypical library that produced high-quality readers' advisory web pages. The data from this group suggest that a majority of the libraries tended to have smaller budgets and serve smaller populations. More than one-third of the libraries served populations under 50,000 or had budgets under $5,000,000.

Arguably the best readers' advisory website, Morton Grove Public Library, served the fewest number of people (22,373) and had the second lowest budget ($1,446,800). Again it would be rash to make a judgement based on a small number of cases, but these figures would seem to contradict the notion that "Well-funded libraries necessarily have better resources or programs." There are many possible reasons for this apparent contradiction. It could be the simple presence of a technically-savvy staff member, the dedication of administration to keep readers' advisory services vibrant, or the fact that some libraries have webmasters while others do not. To put a different spin on the issue, could it be that as the size of library staffs and budgets increase, so too does the bureaucracy leaving new and innovative concepts stagnate? As the number of libraries offering this service increases, all of these will be avenues for further research.

<u>The Implications of Web-Based Service for Librarians, Readers, and Readers' Advisory</u>

While readers' advisory service via public library home pages will inevitably continue to evolve and conceivably enable readers' advisory services to reach a larger audience, there are some issues to be mindful of. Baker says that physical book displays increase accessibility to titles because an item is at arm's length; however, like the book list, the web site is only the first step in locating a title. In order to use a web site for readers' advisory, readers have to create and print a customized book list, locate the item in an OPAC, and then come into the library to retrieve the item. Will this lead to increases in circulation? Similarly, Baker claims that browsers do not use bibliographic tools, like the OPAC. So why would browsers choose to use the library's web site for readers' advisory? We must be mindful of who we are trying to reach with this new tool.

Another way to view this dilemma is that if any readers are using the service, then the results are positive, because either browsers have begun to use bibliographic tools or we have begun reaching an entirely new audience by delivering this service in an alternative format.

The final issue involves equality and access. The public library has existed in its most idealistic sense as an institution whose facilities and resources have been accessible to all people. By offering readers' advisory service via web sites, libraries are requiring computer literacy as a prerequisite of service.

At times, library literature reflects an undercurrent of animosity between traditional library services and technology and information issues. As these giants struggle for bigger pieces of the pie, a movement is afoot by some libraries to integrate the two. One example of this is the increasing number of libraries who, backed by a

renaissance in readers' advisory, are beginning to offer these services via public library home pages. Since budget and staff size do not appear to make much of a difference in whether libraries can offer quality readers' advisory service via the Internet, more of them are beginning to post their book lists and create web pages of their own.

These web sites need not stay simplistic; some librarians have started to offer book club and listserv information, customized booklists, and links to useful fiction-oriented web pages on their readers' advisory pages. Many of them are becoming increasingly more interactive, and readers can now submit their own reviews on several of the sites. With the ability to post and share one's own reviews, librarians and readers can again begin to value fiction. Open, online dialogue and sharing of interpretations between people lend a deeper meaning to fiction itself. By encouraging this interaction, librarians can learn about genres from their most enthusiastic readers and use this knowledge to develop collections and work with other patrons. Furthermore, this interaction fosters a sense of community in an age when technology is often viewed as isolationist and ego-centric.

Appendix 1:
Sample Web Site Evaluation Sheets

Web Site Evaluation Sheet 1

Library Name: Addison Public Library
Location and URL: Addison, IL   http://www.addison.lib.il.us/6read.asp
Final Evaluation Date: April 12, 2000

Genre Book Lists:
     -Number of lists: ___up to 10 ___11 to 20 _X_ more than 20
     -Covers of Books Shown: ___Yes _X_ No
     -Are lists: ___Author Only _X_ Titles and Authors
     -Annotated _X_ Yes ___No
     -If yes, are the annotations: _X_ Written by Staff ___ Submitted by Patrons
     -Imprint dates of books: _X_ Less than 1 year _X_1 to 3 _X_ more than 3
     -Is there a "Staff Recommendations" list? ___Yes _X_No
     -Is there an "If you like Author X, you might like Author Y" list? ___Yes _X_No
     -Is there a "Most Frequently Requested" list? ___Yes _X_No

When was the site last updated? 4/10/00

Interactive database (for this particular library's reviews or book lists): _X_Yes ___No

Were there links to the following? (Check all that apply):
     _X_Literary Award Winners
     _X_External Genre Sites
     _X_Author's Sites
     ___Other Library Book lists
     ___Electronic Fiction Finders (i.e., NoveList, etc.)

Other Special Features: Interesting genres (Computers in Fiction, Novels of China and Hong Kong); Search option brings hits from the entire site but does return book lists; info on library sponsored book talks; automatic reserve list option; book list of titles "soon to be published"

American Library Directory Information
     Population Served   33,175
     Budget   1997-1998 income: $2,140,859
     Size of Staff   N/A

NOTES: Individual lists are updated at different times, independent of the main "Readers' Corner" page

Web Site Evaluation Sheet 2

Library Name: Bettendorf Public Library
Location and URL: Bettendorf, IA   http://www.rbls.lib.il.us/bpl/services/readera.htm
Final Evaluation Date: April 12, 2000

Genre Book Lists:
       -Number of lists: ___up to 10 ___11 to 20 _X_more than 20
       -Covers of Books Shown: ___Yes _X_No
       -Are lists: ___Author Only _X_Titles and Authors
       -Annotated _X_Yes ___No
       -If yes, are the annotations: _X_Written by Staff _X_Submitted by Patrons
       -Imprint dates of books: _X_less than 1 year _X_1 to 3 _X_more than 3
       -Is there a "Staff Recommendations" list? _X_Yes ___No
       -Is there an "If you like Author X, you might like Author Y" list? _X_Yes ___No
       -Is there a "Most Frequently Requested" list? ___Yes _X_No

When was the site last updated? 4/12/2000

Interactive database (for this particular library's reviews or book lists): ___Yes _X_No

Were there links to the following? (Check all that apply):
       ___Literary Award Winners
       ___External Genre Sites
       ___Author's Sites
       ___Other Library Book lists
       ___Electronic Fiction Finders (i.e., NoveList, etc.)

Other Special Features: Weekly "Hot Picks" list; patrons can submit reviews, link to a local radio show, "About Books", with lists of recommended titles; electronic form for submitting readers' advisory questions

American Library Directory Information
       Population Served   28,139
       Budget   1996-1997 income: $1,175,574
       Size of Staff   30 (10 prof, 14 non-prof, 2 cler, 4 student assistants)

NOTES: Link to "Mirage Readers' Advisory Links" (www.prairienet.org/mirage/ra.html); this list links to most of the above categories

Web Site Evaluation Sheet 3

Library Name: Hennepin County Library
Location and URL: Minnetonka, MN http://www.hennepin.lib.mn.us
Final Evaluation Date: April 12, 2000

Genre Book Lists:
      -Number of lists: ___up to 10 ___11 to 20 _X_more than 20
      -Covers of Books Shown: ___Yes _X_No
      -Are lists: ___Author Only _X_Titles and Authors
      -Annotated _X_Yes ___No
      -If yes, are the annotations: _X_Written by Staff ___ Submitted by Patrons
      -Imprint dates of books: _X_less than 1 year _X_1 to 3 _X_more than 3
      -Is there a "Staff Recommendations" list? _X_Yes ___No
      -Is there an "If you like Author X, you might like Author Y" list? _X_Yes ___No
      -Is there a "Most Frequently Requested" list? _X_Yes ___No

When was the site last updated? 4/11/2000

Interactive database (for this particular library's reviews or book lists): _X_Yes ___No

Were there links to the following? (Check all that apply):
      _X_Literary Award Winners
      _X_External Genre Sites
      _X_Author's Sites
      _X_Other Library Booklists
      _X_Electronic Fiction Finders (i.e., NoveList, etc.)

Other Special Features: Extensive list of links (to book review sources, genre web sites, etc.); "Book discussion groups in the Twin Cities Area" section

American Library Directory Information
      Population Served   711,658
      Budget   1998 income: $28,118,241
      Size of Staff   455 (144 prof, 48 non-prof, 263 cler, 925 vol)

NOTES: Interactive database was contained within the "If you like…" section

Web Site Evaluation Sheet 4

Library Name: <u>Morton Grove Public Library</u>
Location and URL: <u>Morton Grove, IL   http://www.webrary.org/rs/rsmenu.html</u>
Final Evaluation Date: <u>April 12, 2000</u>

Genre Book Lists:
      -Number of lists: ___up to 10 ___11 to 20 _X_more than 20
      -Covers of Books Shown: _X_Yes ___No
      -Are lists: ___Author Only _X_Titles and Authors
      -Annotated _X_Yes ___No
      -If yes, are the annotations: _X_Written by Staff ___ Submitted by Patrons
      -Imprint dates of books: _X_less than 1 year _X_1 to 3 _X_more than 3
      -Is there a "Staff Recommendations" list? _X_Yes ___No
      -Is there an "If you like Author X, you might like Author Y" list? ___Yes _X_No
      -Is there a "Most Frequently Requested" list? ___Yes_X_No

When was the site last updated? <u>4/11/2000</u>

Interactive database (for this particular library's reviews or book lists): _X_Yes ___No

Were there links to the following? (Check all that apply):
      _X_Literary Award Winners
      _X_External Genre Sites
      _X_Author's Sites
      _X_Other Library Booklists
      _X_Electronic Fiction Finders (i.e., NoveList, etc.)

Other Special Features: <u>List of newest acquisitions, updated monthly; "Matchbook"</u>
<u>database lets users select genres and create personal lists of materials; maintain Fiction-L,</u>
<u>a listserv about fiction; "Thinking out loud" monthly library book discussion group</u>

<u>American Library Directory</u> Information
      Population Served   <u>22,373</u>
      Budget   <u>1996-1997 income: $1,446,800</u>
      Size of Staff   <u>41 (10 prof, 31 cler)</u>

NOTES: electronic non-fiction bibliographies and pathfinders also available on web site;
link to Hennepin County's "If you like" lists; Staff recommendations given monthly in
"New Books Showcase"

Web Site Evaluation Sheet 5

Library Name: Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County
Location and URL: Charlotte, NC   http://www.readersclub.org
Final Evaluation Date: April 12, 2000

Genre Book Lists:
       -Number of lists: ___up to 10 ___11 to 20 _X_more than 20
       -Covers of Books Shown: _X_Yes ___No
       -Are lists: ___Author Only _X_Titles and Authors
       -Annotated _X_Yes ___No
       -If yes, are the annotations: _X_Written by Staff _X_Submitted by Patrons
       -Imprint dates of books: _X_less than 1 year _X_1 to 3 _X_more than 3
       -Is there a "Staff Recommendations" list? _X_Yes ___No
       -Is there an "If you like Author X, you might like Author Y" list? ___Yes _X_No
       -Is there a "Most Frequently Requested" list? ___Yes _X_No

When was the site last updated? 4/2000

Interactive database (for this particular library's reviews or book lists): _X_Yes ___No

Were there links to the following? (Check all that apply):
       _X_Literary Award Winners
       _X_External Genre Sites
       ___Author's Sites
       _X_Other Library Booklists
       _X_Electronic Fiction Finders (i.e., NoveList, etc.)

Other Special Features: Database searchable by author, title, reviewer (staff member name), or reading interest; system-wide book club information; "Video Corner" with recommendations; all reviewed books include cover graphic

American Library Directory Information
       Population Served   624,464
       Budget   1998-1999 projected income: $21,432,615
       Size of Staff   441 (102 prof, 339 support, 450 vol)

NOTES:

Appendix 2:
American Library Directory statistics

Population Served	Number of Libraries (18 reporting)
up to 100,000	9
100,001-1,000,000	7
1,000,001 and above	2

Size of Budget	Number of Libraries (16 reporting)
up to $10,000,000	8
$10,000,001-$20,000,000	2
$20,000,001-$30,000,000	4
$30,000,001 and above	2

Size of Staff	Number of Libraries (16 reporting)
1-100	8
101-500	7
over 500	1

Appendix 3:
Screen Captures

Figure 1. Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County's Reader's Club

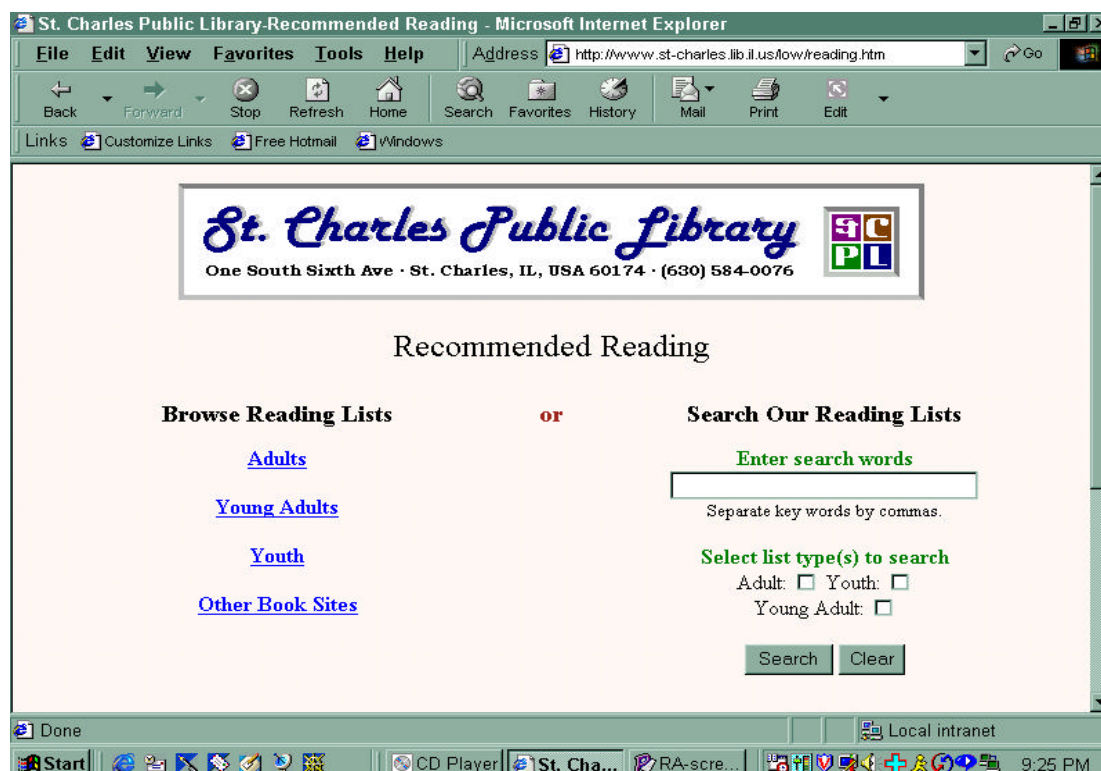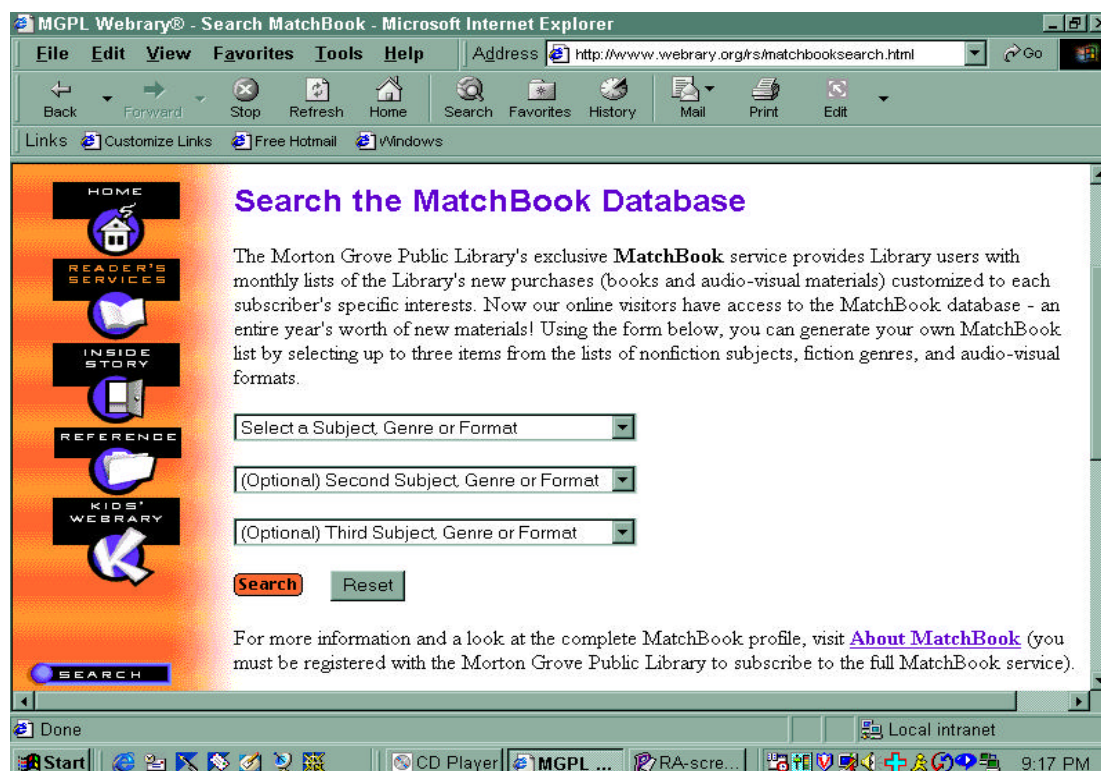**Figure 2. Los Angeles Public Library's California File**

Figure 3. St. Charles Public Library

Figure 4. Morton Grove Public Library's "Matchbook" database

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