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Book reviews are one of the tools that librarians use for readers' advisory. Reviews describe the contents of books and place the works into larger literary contexts through comparisons to other works and other authors. Being able to find similar authors and books is a fundamental yet challenging aspect of readers' advisory, and literary comparisons in book reviews play an important part in this process. This paper is a content analysis from a readers' advisory perspective of the number and type of literary comparisons in library and book trade periodicals. A total of 400 fiction book reviews were gathered for the study from *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Publishers Weekly*. *Library Journal* and *Booklist* were found to include the highest percentage of non-neutral comparisons to other works and other authors. It is the recommendation of the study that all of the periodicals should include more non-neutral literary comparisons. This study is valuable to librarians, who consult and write reviews, and to vendors of electronic readers' advisory databases that include full-text book reviews.

Headings:

Book reviews and reviewing—Evaluation

Information systems—Special subjects—Fiction

Reader guidance

Reader services

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BOOK REVIEWS FROM A
READERS' ADVISORY PERSPECTIVE

by
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Introduction

Book reviews are one of the resources that librarians use for readers' advisory. Reviews are useful because they describe the contents of the book being reviewed, make a judgment as to the quality of the book, and place the work into a larger literary context through comparisons to other works and other authors. It is the use of literary comparisons that helps readers' advisors make critical connections between different authors and works, so that when a patron requests a book that is like one written by Barbara Taylor Bradford, the librarian can suggest Penny Vincenzi even if she has not read any of Vincenzi's works. Literary comparisons are particularly powerful in readers' advisory because of the inclusion of book reviews in full-text searchable readers' advisory databases; librarians and users can search the reviews and make connections between different works. Being able to find similar authors and books is a fundamental yet challenging aspect of readers' advisory, and literary comparisons in book reviews play an important part in this process. Most scholars have studied reviews from a selection perspective; this paper is instead a content analysis from a readers' advisory perspective of the number and type of literary comparisons in library and book trade periodical book reviews.

This paper will answer the question: *Does the number of literary comparisons in fiction book reviews differ among library and book trade periodicals?* The reviews that are analyzed in this paper are those included in periodicals that librarians regularly use

for selection and readers' advisory: *Publisher's Weekly*, *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. This study determined whether literary comparisons existed in each review and coded existing comparisons into three groups: comparisons to the writing style of other authors, comparisons to books by other authors, and comparisons to other books by the author being reviewed. In addition, comparisons were coded as to whether the comparisons were favorable, negative, or neutral. The author of each review was noted. Through this process, this study was able to determine how often comparisons were used in book reviews in order to judge which journals are the most fruitful for readers' advisory. The implications of this paper affect the way that librarians write book reviews and impact the review journals that vendors select for inclusion in searchable readers' advisory databases.

Literature Review

The role of literary comparisons in fiction book reviews for readers' advisory is discussed from several different angles in the literature. Judy Ann Beck, a master's student at UNC-Chapel Hill, took a selection of book reviews for six best-selling novels and did a content analysis of the literary references found in the reviews in terms of their characteristics and the functions they served. Beck sorted the references according to what centuries the authors lived in, the nationalities of the authors, and the styles of literature that the authors are known for (Beck 1980, 16). She then considered if the references were simply for decoration, for support of the reviewer's opinion, to acknowledge the achievements of an author, to make a comparison to another author's work, or to impart historical perspective (Beck 1980, 17). Beck also examined how clearly the reference was stated (Beck 1980, 17-18). She then noted whether or not the literary references were made in library and book trade periodicals, general periodicals, or scholarly periodicals (Beck 1980, 40-41). Beck's main objective was to examine the diversity of references and she focused on several kinds of literary references in addition to literary comparisons. She only acknowledged the use of reviews as selection tools. This paper differs because it is a content analysis of the frequency with which literary comparisons are used in different library and book trade periodicals, and the results are interpreted from a readers' advisory perspective.

Joyce Saricks is a prolific authority on readers' advisory who has discussed the use of book reviews for readers' advisory. Saricks explains the role of reviews as tools for readers' advisory when she states that: "Some of us feel that we must read several

books before we are comfortably certain of the appeal of an author or genre; others feel they can read fewer titles and work with reviews, book jackets, reference materials, and readers' comments in order to ascertain the appeal. Both approaches are sound" (Saricks 1997, 86). In addition, in "Reading the Future of the Public Library," Saricks discusses the intent of specific library and book trade periodicals to be useful for readers' advisory: "Both *Booklist* and *Library Journal* acknowledge the importance of readers' advisory in articles, and in *Booklist*, especially, there is a clear commitment from the editor and reviewers to highlight information useful to readers' advisors in its reviews" (Saricks 2001, 116). Book reviews are an important part of readers' advisory.

Saricks also discusses the role of literary comparisons within the reviews themselves. In "The Best Tools for Advisors and How to Integrate Them into Successful Transactions," Saricks states that "more and more reviews try to place books and authors within genres or in comparison to others that might appeal to the same reader" (Saricks 2001, 167). She supports this statement within her bibliographic notes by saying:

A good example is Bill Ott's review of Robert Littell's *Walking Back the Cat*. He writes that in this book "you'll find a fine mix of Tony Hillerman atmosphere, le Carre psychology, and Ross Thomas plotting" (Ott 1997, 1967). Those comparisons help us place the title and give us clues on how to describe both book and author to readers (Saricks 2001).

The frequency at which comparisons such these are made is what is surveyed in this paper.

Within the selection literature there is acknowledgement of the role that book reviews play in readers' advisory. Francine Fialkoff discusses the dual role of reviews in "Reading the Reviews." Though Fialkoff states that book reviews are the number one selection tool for librarians, she concludes her article by saying that "beyond that,

however, reviews serve as the ultimate reader's advisory tools" (Fialkoff 1998, 127). In Don Sager's article "Reviewing the Reviewers," Jack Hicks, the Director of the Deerfield Public Library in Deerfield, Illinois, stresses how important comparisons are for the challenging job of readers' advisory: "Like comparisons are also useful in fiction for readers' advisory work, which is one of the hardest things we do" (Sager 1993, 11). Even within the selection literature, the importance of book reviews for readers' advisory and the role of literary comparisons are acknowledged.

Generalized literature about writing book reviews also stresses the importance of making literary comparisons within reviews. When Lynn Z. Bloom discusses the ethical responsibilities of book reviewers, she says one of the goals of a reviewer should be to "enable the reader to understand the work's significance in relation to the author's previous (or best known) works, and relevant works of others" (Bloom 2002, 13). According to James W. Cortada, one of the ways to be a bad reviewer is to "fail to tell the reader what the book is about and how it fits into the larger body of literature on the subject" (Cortada 1998, 36). Grefarth says that reviews should answer this question: "How does this book compare to others on the same or similar topics, or by the same author?" (Grefarth 1987, 38). Sylvia Kamerman also says that reviewers should:

State how this new book compares with the author's earlier works—or possibly with novels on the same theme. For example, if you are reviewing a novel about adolescence or the loneliness of prisoners, the tragedy of aging athletes, etc., and there is another new work of fiction on the same theme, you might wish to comment on the relative quality of both novels (Kamerman 1978, xx).

Literary comparisons in book reviews are an expected and appreciated aspect of book reviews even apart from readers' advisory.

Within the readers' advisory literature there is also discussion of how fiction readers' often seek similar books to ones they have read and liked, and this supports the need for the use of comparisons in book reviews. Saricks defines similar authors as: "A group of authors whose works share elements that appeal to the same readers" (Saricks 1997, 9). In "The Best Tools for Advisors and How to Integrate Them into Successful Transactions," Saricks says that there are four types of readers' advisory questions from library patrons, the third of which is "those that require authors similar to an author read and enjoyed" (Saricks 2001, 170). In addition, she says these questions are often the hardest to answer: "Readers seeking authors 'just like' others they have enjoyed present us with a more difficult task" (Saricks 2001, 171). Therefore, literary comparisons in book reviews can help librarians tackle difficult questions from readers' who seek similar authors and books: "If comparisons are made between authors, and similarities and differences are pointed out, we have a real find. This type of information can be enormously helpful when we and the patron are on the trail of possible similar authors" (Saricks 1997, 19).

When Saricks discusses how librarians can become better readers' advisors, the importance of literary comparisons is again evident. She lists three phases of training, and within the second phase is "grouping books with other authors and titles that have similar appeal" (Saricks 1997, 61). Within the third phase of becoming adept at readers' advisory, librarians should think about what genre a book fits into and may find it useful "to look for dissimilar authors... It is often easier, in fact, to identify like authors after eliminating those that are dissimilar. The ability to recognize why authors and titles are similar or dissimilar expands our understanding of the genre" (Saricks 1997, 62).

Literary comparisons within book reviews help librarians identify similar and dissimilar authors and this is a critical part of readers' advisory.

Duncan Smith has discussed the use of electronic resources for readers' advisory, particularly full-text searchable databases such as NoveList. Smith says that "electronic resources serve as added memory" (Smith 1997, 21). Librarians cannot remember every title that they have read or every literary comparison in a review; however, because "electronic resources can remember everything they know about a title and recall and use it quickly to establish links to a wide range of other authors and titles" (Smith 1997, 21), the significance of literary comparisons in reviews is increased and reviews are even more powerful readers' advisory tools.

The role of literary comparisons in fiction book reviews for readers' advisory is touched upon in several different sources, most prominently in readers' advisory literature (Saricks). Selection literature and generalized book review literature also acknowledge the importance of literary comparisons and the role of book reviews in readers' advisory (Fialkoff; Sager; Bloom; Cortada; Grefarth; Kamerman). The very nature of how readers select books mandates the use of literary comparisons (Saricks). The role of electronic resources as added memory further validates the importance of literary comparisons in book reviews (Smith). The literature referred to here supports the need for further study of the use of literary comparisons in fiction book reviews. Thus, this study is significant because it examines from a readers' advisory perspective the frequency at which literary comparisons are made in fiction book reviews.

Methodology

A manifest content analysis was conducted of 400 fiction book reviews that were included in *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. These periodicals were created by librarians and publishers to inform librarians about librarianship and to provide reviews of books and other materials. These periodicals were selected for this study based on descriptions in Katz's *Magazines for Libraries* (Katz 1995) and from literature about what periodicals librarians use for book reviews (Searing 1995; Fennessy 1997; Saricks 2001, 116). Starting with the October 1, 2004 issue of each periodical, the first 100 fiction book reviews that were published in each periodical were photocopied from the print issue of the periodical, for a total of 400 reviews.

Reviews from the following issues were used:

<i>Booklist</i> :	Vol. 101, no. 3; Vol. 101, no. 4; Vol. 101, no. 5; Vol. 101, no. 6; Vol. 101, no. 7
<i>Library Journal</i> :	Vol. 129, no. 16; Vol. 129, no. 17; Vol. 129, no. 18; Vol. 129, no. 18
<i>Kirkus</i> :	Vol. 72, no. 19; Vol. 72, no. 20; Vol. 72, no. 21; Vol. 72, no. 22
<i>Publishers Weekly</i> :	Vol. 251, no. 40; Vol. 251, no. 41; Vol. 251, no. 42; Vol. 251, no. 43; Vol. 251, no. 44

Only reviews grouped within the "Fiction" sections of each periodical were gathered for the study; all other works in all other categories (Mystery, Romance, Science Fiction, etc.) were excluded.

As each review was read and coded, data was recorded about what kind of literary comparisons were found in the review. Data was also recorded about the author of the

review (if this person was a librarian, staff person, or if the identity was unknown). Each review was given an identification number. Findings were recorded into a series of Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

The following definitions and examples were used as rules for coding and determining what comparisons were included in the study.

Literary comparisons are qualitative, stylistic comparisons of one author's book, or one author's writing style, with other works by the same author, works by a different author, or a different author's writing style. References to the writing styles of different authors or works can take the form of comparisons to the pacing, language, tone, characterization, and plots of another author's writing or book, or can be simply references to an author's name.

Examples:

1. Comparison of works by the same author:

"In Fforde's latest, which is just as charming as her previous eight novels (e.g., *Second Thyme Around*), Nel is appalled to learn..." (Hanes 2004, 53).

2. Comparison to works by a different author:

"...Manguel gives the reader a scenario that hints of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*" (Wells 2004, 55).

3. Comparison to a different author's writing style:

"Highly recommended for popular fiction collections and for readers who enjoy the work of Karen Robards and Nora Roberts" (Mellett 2004, 54).

Favorable comparisons state that there are qualitative similarities between the two authors or books being compared:

"... This novel is reminiscent in its learned tone of the works of A. S. Byatt" (Hooper 2004, 391).

Negative comparisons state that there are qualitative dissimilarities between the two authors or books being compared. NOTE: A negative comparison does not necessarily indicate that one book is better than another, only that they are not similar:

“A departure from Woods’s popular Stone Barrington thrillers...” (Vicarel 2004, 75).

Neutral comparisons are references to other works without making a qualitative judgment about the relative value of one in contrast to the other. These comparisons often take the shape of parenthetical mentions of other works by the author being reviewed without making any other comment:

“Livesey (*Eva Moves the Furniture*) here tells the deceptively simple love story...” (Benson 2004, 71).

In situations where there were references to more than one literary work within a single comparison, each work that was mentioned was counted as an individual comparison. So, for the following review, three favorable comparisons to works by a different author were counted—one favorable comparison to *A Confederacy of Dunces*, one favorable comparison to Michael Chabon’s *Wonder Boys*, and an additional favorable comparison to Frederick Exely’s *A Fan Notes*:

“... Majors makes a welcome contribution to the unofficial canon of ‘loser lit,’ which includes John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), Michael Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* (1995), and Frederick Exely’s *A Fan Notes* (1988)” (Eberle 2004, 390).

References to series were also recorded. These were counted as comparisons to other works by the author being reviewed or to works by a different author (depending on the particular comparison).

Results

Overall Findings for all Periodicals

Of the 400 reviews included in this study, 262, or 65.5%, had at least one kind of literary comparison present, and 138, or 34.5%, had no comparisons; therefore, almost two-thirds of all the reviews had at least one type of comparison. Within the 262 reviews that contained comparisons, there were a total of 386 individual literary comparisons. There were more individual comparisons than the number of reviews with comparisons because 88 of the reviews had more than one type of comparison.

The total number of comparisons made to works by the same author as that being reviewed was 296. This represented 76.68% of all the literary comparisons found in all reviews, and accounted for the largest category of comparisons made. The overall number of comparisons made to works by a different author than the one being reviewed was 55. This represented only 14.25% of all literary comparisons in all reviews. The total number of comparisons made to a different author's writing style was 35, which accounted for 9.07% of all literary comparisons in all reviews.

The total number of favorable comparisons of any kind (comparisons to works by the same author, works by a different author, and a different author's writing style) was 155. This means that 40.16% of all literary comparisons made were favorable. The total number of negative comparisons was 34; this accounted for only 8.81% of all negative comparisons. The largest group of comparisons was neutral comparisons—there were 197 neutral comparisons, or 51.04% of all comparisons.

The single most often occurring type of literary comparison in all periodicals was neutral comparisons to works by the same author as that being reviewed. There were 193 neutral comparisons to works by the same author, which represented 50% of all literary comparisons made in all periodicals. The next largest group of comparisons (but not even half as large as that of neutral comparisons to works by the same author) was favorable comparisons to works by the same author, which had 79 comparisons, or 20.47% of all comparisons made. The third largest group of comparisons was favorable comparisons to works by a different author, with 42 occurrences, at 10.88% of all comparisons made. The fourth largest group was favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style; there were 34 comparisons in this category, which represented 8.81% of all comparisons. The fifth most frequently included type of literary comparison was negative comparisons to works by the same author, which accounted for 24 comparisons, or 6.22%. There were 9 instances of negative comparisons to works by a different author, or 2.33% of all comparisons. Neutral comparisons to works by a different author were the next smallest group of comparisons, with only 4 instances, which represented 1.04% of all comparisons. There was only one occurrence of a negative comparison to a different author's writing style, or .26% of all comparisons made. There was not a single neutral comparison to a different author's writing style.

Findings by Periodical

The following order ranks periodicals according to number of reviews with literary comparisons, from most to least: *Library Journal* (74 out of 100 reviews in

Library Journal contained literary comparisons, or 74%); *Publishers Weekly* (70 out of 100 reviews had literary comparisons, or 70%); *Kirkus Reviews* (69 out of 100 reviews had literary comparisons, or 69%); and *Booklist* (49 out of 100 reviews in *Booklist* contained literary comparisons, or 49%). Of the total 262 individual reviews with comparisons, *Library Journal* accounted for 28.24% of all the reviews with comparisons, *Publishers Weekly* accounted for 26.72%, *Kirkus* accounted for 26.34%, and *Booklist* accounted for 18.70%.

Library Journal also had the highest number of individual literary comparisons; within the 74 reviews that had comparisons, there were 118 comparisons. *Publishers Weekly* had the next largest number of individual comparisons—103. *Kirkus* was third, with 97 individual comparisons, and *Booklist* was last, with 70.

Comparisons to works by the same author

The periodical with the most number of comparisons to works by the same author was *Publishers Weekly*, with 92 comparisons. This represented 31.08% out of all comparisons made to works by the same author in all periodicals, but accounted for 89.32% of all comparisons made within *Publishers Weekly*. The periodical with the next highest amount of comparisons to works by the same author was *Library Journal*, which had 88 comparisons. This accounted for 29.73% of all comparisons made to works by the same author in all periodicals, and 74.58% of all comparisons made within *Library Journal*. *Kirkus* had the third largest number of comparisons to works by the same author, which was 78 comparisons. This means that *Kirkus* contained 26.35% of all the

comparisons made to works by the same author within all periodicals, and that 80.41% of all comparisons in *Kirkus* were to works by the same author. Lastly, *Booklist* had 40 comparisons to works by the same author, which was 13.47% of all comparisons made to works by the same author in all periodicals. Within *Booklist* itself, 57.14% of comparisons made were to works by the same author.

Comparisons to Works by a Different Author

The periodical with the highest number of comparisons to works by a different author was *Booklist*, with 22 comparisons. This figure accounted for 40.74% of all comparisons made to works by a different author in all periodicals, and 31.43% of all comparisons made within *Booklist*. Interestingly, *Booklist* had the lowest total number of individual comparisons and accounted for only 18.70% of the total number of comparisons made in all periodicals, yet the comparisons that were made in *Booklist* represented the largest portion of comparisons to works by a different author. The periodical with the next highest number of comparisons to works by a different author was *Library Journal*, with 13 comparisons. This number represented 23.64% of all comparisons made to works by a different author in all periodicals, and 11.92% of comparisons within *Library Journal*. *Kirkus* had 12 comparisons to works by a different author, which represented 20% of all comparisons to works by a different author in all periodicals, and 7.22% of all comparisons in *Kirkus*. *Publishers Weekly* had the lowest number of comparisons to works by a different author, only 8. This represented 14.55%

of all comparisons to works by a different author in all periodicals, and only 7.77% of all comparisons in *Publishers Weekly*.

Comparisons to a Different Author's Writing Style

Library Journal had the highest number of comparisons to a different author's writing style—17. This figure accounted for 48.57%—almost half—of all comparisons made to a different author's writing style in all periodicals, and 14.41% of all comparisons made in *Library Journal*. *Booklist*, which had the smallest total number of comparisons out of all the periodicals, had the second highest number of comparisons to a different author's writing style—8. Out of all comparisons to a different author's writing style in all periodicals, this was 22.86%, and 11.43% of all comparisons made in *Booklist*. *Kirkus* accounted for 20% of all comparisons to a different author's writing style in all periodicals, with 7 comparisons. This figure represented 7.22% of all comparisons made in *Kirkus*. *Publishers Weekly* had the lowest number of comparisons to a different author's writing style, with only 3. This number was only 8.97% of all comparisons made to a different author's writing style in all periodicals, and only 2.91% of all comparisons made in *Publishers Weekly*.

Findings Regarding Favorable, Negative, and Neutral Comparisons in Each Periodical

There were varying rates at which each type of comparison was used within the four periodicals. The comparisons made most often in all four periodicals were neutral

comparisons to works by the same author. This comparison was made at a rate of 48.31% in *Library Journal*, 55.34% in *Publishers Weekly*, 55.67% in *Kirkus*, and a rate of 37.14% in *Booklist*. Favorable comparisons to works by the same author were the second most-frequently used comparison within each individual periodical except for *Booklist*. In *Publishers Weekly*, 26.21% of all comparisons in the periodical were favorable comparisons to works by the same author; in *Kirkus*, the figure was 20.62%; in *Library Journal*, the figure was 18.64%. The second-most frequently made comparisons in *Booklist* out of all comparisons in that periodical were favorable comparisons to works by a different author, at 20%. The third most frequently used comparison within each individual periodical was different for each. In *Booklist*, favorable comparisons to works by the same author were third at 14.29%. In *Library Journal*, favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style were third at a rate of 14.41%. In *Kirkus*, favorable comparisons to works by a different author were third at a rate of 12.37%, and in *Publishers Weekly* the third most-frequently used comparisons were negative comparisons to works by the same author, at 7.77%.

The remaining comparisons used within each periodical are as follows for each periodical. *Booklist*: favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style, 11.43%; negative comparisons to works by a different author, 8.57%; negative comparisons to works by the same author, 5.71%; neutral comparisons to works by a different author, 2.86%. *Library Journal*: favorable comparisons to works by a different author, 10.17%; negative comparisons to works by the same author, 7.63%; negative comparisons to works by a different author, .85%. *Kirkus*: favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style, 7.22%; negative comparisons to works by the same author, 3.09%; neutral

comparisons to works by the same author, 1.03%. *Publishers Weekly*: favorable comparisons to works by a different author, 4.85%; negative comparisons to works by a different author, 1.94%; favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style, 1.94%; negative comparisons to a different author's writing style, .97%.

Analysis

Clearly, the use of literary comparisons is an ordinary occurrence in book reviews, with 65.50% of all reviews in the study containing at least one kind of literary comparison. However, there is still room for more widespread use of literary comparisons in reviews. The addition of comparisons to the one-third of all reviews that do not have any comparisons would increase the usefulness of book reviews for readers' advisory.

Two findings indicate that comparisons tend to be neutral and made to works by the same author as that being reviewed, and this decreases the effectiveness of reviews for readers' advisory. Of all comparisons in all periodicals, 76.68% were comparisons to works by the same author, and 50% were neutral comparisons to works by the same author. These types of comparisons do not make qualitative judgments about one work in comparison to another, so the readers' advisor cannot know whether a person who liked the author's previous work would be likely to enjoy the work being reviewed. For instance, the statement that "Payne's haunting second novel, following *The Virgin Knot* (2002), takes place during the Balkan War in a Hungarian refugee camp housing 48,000 Croats" (Donovan 2004, 390) does not offer any insight into how *The Virgin Knot* compares with and holds up to the book being reviewed, *The Sound of Blue*. Though statements such as these are useful somewhat by alerting the readers' advisor to other works by an author, these comparisons do not offer insight into the relative appeal of one book to another. At present, this somewhat limits the usefulness of reviews for readers' advisory; increased use of favorable/negative comparisons to works by the same author,

comparisons to works by a different author, and comparisons to a different author's writing style would improve the effectiveness of book reviews as readers' advisory tools.

Favorable comparisons are the second most-frequently used type of comparison in all periodicals (40.16%). This is noteworthy because favorable comparisons are the ones that are most useful for readers' advisory. For example, the statement: "Much like Jan Karon's popular 'Mitford' series, the story takes place in a small town full of interesting characters" (Kelm 2004, 72-4) clearly tells the readers' advisor that patrons who enjoyed entries in Karon's "Mitford" series might be interested in the book being reviewed—Fannie Flagg's *A Redbird Christmas*—because of qualitative similarities in appeal factors such as setting and character. Additional use of favorable comparisons would strengthen the efficacy of book reviews as readers' advisory tools.

Negative comparisons accounted for only 8.81% of all comparisons in all periodicals. This figure is interesting because as Saricks suggests, readers' advisors can learn about genres and authors by understanding differences between authors (Saricks 1997, 62). However, negative comparisons such as: "In a dramatic change from the 19th-century American settings of his previous novels (e.g. *Gabriel's Story*), Durham's latest offers a rich, exciting, and panoramic view of the legendary Carthaginian general who almost conquered Rome" (Conroy 2004, 72) might only complicate the results of a search in a full-text searchable readers' advisory database. A user might enter the keywords "Gabriel's Story" into a search of reviews and expect to find reviews that mention a title with a similarity to the work; instead, this review would mention a work that was different. In effect, this would be a false hit. Though this type of comparison can still be useful, it does not immediately result in a possible title for the user that is similar to the

one that was previously enjoyed. The use of negative comparisons at a rate of only 8.81% out of all comparisons in all reviews is probably an appropriate frequency; the overuse of negative comparisons would decrease the effectiveness of book reviews as readers' advisory tools.

The findings for each periodical shed some interesting light on which periodical is the most useful for readers' advisory work. At first, based only on overall findings, it would appear that *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Kirkus* are about equally useful for readers' advisory, and that *Booklist* is by far the least useful. About 70% of all reviews in *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Kirkus* included some type of literary comparison, but only 49% of reviews in *Booklist* included comparisons. Of the total 262 reviews that included comparisons, *Library Journal* accounted for 28.24% of all the reviews, *Publishers Weekly* accounted for 26.72%, *Kirkus* accounted for 26.34%, but *Booklist* accounted for only 18.70%. However, when we examine the actual content of these comparisons, it is evident that *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus* are not as fruitful for providing qualitative literary comparisons, and that the usage of qualitative comparisons within *Booklist* is relatively high even though the overall rate with which comparisons are made is low.

For instance, the frequency with which neutral comparisons to works by the same author are made is what separates *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus* from *Booklist*. Over half of all comparisons in *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus* are neutral comparisons to works by the same author—55.34% and 55.67% respectively. This means that one out of two comparisons in these periodicals will really only be references that offer the readers' advisor no qualitative insight into the appeal of one book in contrast to another. In

contrast, in *Booklist*, only 37.14% of all comparisons are neutral comparisons to works by the same author. *Booklist*, though containing the least number of total comparisons, has the lowest rate of neutral comparison usage within the periodical. If *Booklist* could simply do more of what it does well, it would clearly be the best source for qualitative literary comparisons in book reviews.

The other types of comparisons included in *Booklist* also distinguish the quality of the reviews in this periodical from those in *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus*. In *Booklist*, 31.43% of all comparisons were to works by a different author, and 11.43% of all comparisons were to a different author's writing style. In contrast, only 7.77% out of all comparisons in *Publishers Weekly* were to works by a different author, and only 2.91% of all comparisons in the periodical were to a different author's writing style. In *Kirkus*, only 12.37% of the comparisons in the periodical were to works by a different author, and 7.22% were to a different author's writing style. These types of comparisons are qualitative and valuable for reader's advisory because they help answer questions such as: "I'd really like to read a book by Author X. All of Author X's books are checked out; who else can you recommend that is similar?" Qualitative comparisons explicitly say why one book is similar to another and can provide insight into how the books have the same appeal factor—is it the writing style, the characters, or the setting? Though there could be more qualitative comparisons made in all the periodicals, *Booklist* makes more useful comparisons and at a higher rate than *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus*.

Based on the content of the reviews in these periodicals at the time of the study, *Library Journal* appears to be the best overall periodical as a source for literary comparisons in readers' advisory. This periodical had the most reviews with

comparisons out of all in the study (74%), and the highest number of individual comparisons made within the reviews (118). In addition, 11.02% of comparisons made in *Library Journal* were to comparisons to a different author's works, and 14.41% of all comparisons were to a different author's writing style. This places *Library Journal* as third amongst periodicals for the rate of comparisons to works by a different author out of all comparisons in that journal, and first amongst periodicals for the rate of comparisons to a different author's writing style out of all comparisons in that journal. In addition, *Library Journal* had the second-lowest rate of neutral comparisons to works by the same author (48.31%) out of all comparisons in the periodical, second only to the rate in *Booklist*. *Library Journal* had a higher total number of qualitative comparisons (61) than did *Booklist* (42), *Publishers Weekly* (45), and *Kirkus* (42). *Library Journal* had better rates of qualitative comparison inclusion within the periodical than did *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus*. These factors make the reviews in *Library Journal* the best source for readers' advisory work that requires literary comparisons.

Differences in the authorship of the reviews in these periodicals may account for reasons why *Library Journal* and *Booklist* provided more qualitative literary comparisons than did *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly*. The reviews that are included in *Library Journal* are written primarily by librarians; 84 out of the 100 reviews in the study were written by people who identified themselves as librarians. The other 16 reviewers may well be or have been librarians, but the authors were only identified by their name and location, so it was impossible to tell if the actual number of librarians who wrote the reviews was higher. *Booklist* is an imprint of the American Library Association and these reviews are also signed, though written by staff members. The reviews in *Kirkus* and *Publishers*

Weekly are unsigned and written by staff members. It is unclear whether or not the writers are possibly librarians or aware of their interests, but it is clear that these periodicals have no formal ties to the American Library Association or library groups. It is possible to say that reviews written by librarians or edited by a publishing association that has library interests in mind may well include more readers' advisory content than others.

In addition, the editorial content of these periodicals may explain why *Library Journal* and *Booklist* contain more literary comparisons that are useful in readers' advisory than do *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly*. The issues of *Booklist* that were included in this study contained articles written by Joyce Saricks and which explicitly mentioned readers' advisory. Saricks has a semi-regular column called "At Leisure with Joyce Saricks," and the October 1, 2004 column discusses providing readers' advisory to people who are looking for something to read while on vacation, the November 1, 2004 column details how librarians can incorporate simple aspects of readers' advisory into their work, and the December 1, 2004 column contemplates providing readers' advisory to library patrons during the holidays. There are also "Read-alikes" that provide annotated lists of children's and young adult books on a particular theme and that are similar to other books that are reviewed in the periodical. In *Library Journal*, there were not any readers' advisory articles within the issues that were included in this study, but a search in InfoTrac OneFile and Academic Search Elite revealed that previous issues of *Library Journal* contained articles such as: "Readers' Advisory 101," and "Taking Back Readers' Advisory." Readers' advisory is clearly an important issue to these periodicals,

and this surely accounts for the reason why these periodicals had more qualitative literary comparisons than did *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus*.

In contrast, *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly* do not include readers' advisory content because these periodicals have a different editorial scope. *Kirkus* has no additional content other than reviews. The reviews appear to offer more information about the plot and story of the work being reviewed than do those in the other periodicals; the focus of *Kirkus* appears to be on providing detailed descriptions of the content of the books rather than placing them into larger literary contexts. *Publishers Weekly*, though also including editorial content, speaks to booksellers and publishers in addition to libraries. It is primarily a news source for the publishing industry. Examples of articles featured in the issues that were included in this study are: "Financial Woes at Alternative Comics," (Nadel 2004, 10) and "Llewellyn Adding Mystery Imprint," (Kirch 2004, 12). There are articles in *Publishers Weekly* that provide overviews of different genres, but these are written from a business slant rather than a readers' advisory perspective: "Many of the titles that sell, sell extremely well, like Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, which has sold 15 million copies since its 1990 publication by Free Press" (Rosen 2004, 36). Because *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly* are not written only with librarians in mind, these periodicals contain less useful comparisons for readers' advisory.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

Though this study indicates that *Library Journal* and *Booklist* are the best periodicals for providing literary comparisons useful to readers' advisory work, this is not to say that the other periodicals are not also helpful in readers' advisory work in other areas. As mentioned above, reviews in *Kirkus*, as well as *Publishers Weekly*, may contain significant information about the plot, setting, and characters within the books. This type of information can be extremely helpful for readers' advisory work; there are readers who enjoy reading only about certain topics and themes—women, the South, police officers, etc—rather than finding similar authors. An informative review can help direct readers in the direction of specific appeal factors. An additional study would be necessary to determine which periodical has the most readers' advisory content for character, setting, and story information.

One other limitation of the study in terms of determining which periodical is the best for readers' advisory work is that the study only recorded data about literary comparisons, but there are other kinds of comparisons that could possibly be helpful for readers' advisory work. While coding the reviews, I came across references to movies, television shows, dramas, and opera. For example: “Reminiscent of an episode from the *Twilight Zone*, this stylishly written novel uses in-depth characterizations and convincing detail to build in credibility before serving up a whopper of a ghost story” (Wilkinson 2004, 389). The comparison to the *Twilight Zone* certainly gets at the appeal of this book and informs the reader about how the book might please a certain type of audience.

If included in the study, this reference would have been a positive comparison. A future study could take other types of comparisons into consideration.

Another area for further study would be if there were different rates of comparison usage within different genres or if there were more comparisons made for new authors vs. established authors. This study only examined reviews for books listed in the “Fiction” section of each periodical. However, it is possible that there would be different rates of comparison usage for genres vs. fiction, or within the genres themselves. It is also possible that there would be more comparisons made in reviews of newer authors, specifically references to older, established authors or works that the reader may be familiar with. However, since this information was not gathered as part of this study, this is only a guess. Additional investigation in the future could determine whether these hypotheses are true.

Significance of this Study

This study determined the effectiveness of book reviews as sources of literary comparisons for readers' advisory by discovering the frequency with which comparisons are used in several library and book trade review periodicals. This study is significant for several reasons: the rise of readers' advisory in public libraries, the role that librarians play in the publication of reviews, the increasing number of books published each year, the power of literary comparisons when they are included in full-text searchable readers' advisory databases, and the state of readers' advisory service in public libraries.

Readers' advisory is on the rise in the United States. Duncan Smith has even called the popularity of readers' advisory a "renaissance" (Smith 1997, 20). Because of the increased role and visibility of readers' advisory in public libraries, it is important that existing tools are analyzed and improved so that librarians can provide the best possible service to readers. This analysis of reviews from a readers' advisory perspective critiqued the effectiveness of several review periodicals as tools and determined that *Library Journal* had the highest rate of overall comparison usage coupled with a high-rate of qualitative comparison usage, and that *Booklist* had the lowest rate of comparison usage but a high-rate of qualitative comparison usage within the periodical. This study initiates the improvement of reviews.

Librarians themselves write many of the reviews in library and book trade periodicals. One out of every five librarians who participated in a survey about the how they use book reviews stated that they themselves also write reviews (Fennessy 1997, 66). Librarians wrote 86 out of 100 of the reviews from *Library Journal* that were

included in this study. These results dictate to librarians how reviews need to be improved—more comparisons need to be made overall, less neutral comparisons of any sort need to be made, and more qualitative comparisons to works by the same author, works by a different author, and a different author’s writing style are needed. Librarians can incorporate these recommendations into their reviews.

The increasing number of books published each year also makes this study significant. In 2003, the number of books published rose 19%, with a total of 175,000 new books published (Milliot 2004, 7). There is no possible way that any librarian could read all of these books. Because of this escalating situation, coupled with the rise in readers’ advisory, librarians need tools that will supplement the reading that they are able to do. The recommendations of this study will result in book reviews becoming even better tools during this time of increased publishing. Librarians can also decide which periodicals are the best ones to use for readers’ advisory.

This study is also significant when we understand just how powerful literary comparisons are when reviews are included in full-text searchable readers’ advisory databases such as NoveList. These databases, which serve as “added memory” (Smith 1997, 21), effectively remember all the comparisons made in book reviews, so that librarians do not have to remember or write down every literary comparison they have read in a book review. Librarians can then search the database and make connections to books based upon literary comparisons. For instance, if a librarian wanted to recommend a similar author to Anne Tyler, she could do a Boolean search in NoveList and specify that she wanted to only see results that mentioned “Anne Tyler” in the review, but also

that the author of the book being reviewed should not be “Tyler, Anne.” Examples of the results are:

A review from *Booklist* for *Fault Lines* by Anne Rivers Siddons. Excerpt:

“Like Robert Waller's *Bridges of Madison County* (1992) and Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years*, Siddons' new novel tells of a self-sacrificing housewife who is tempted to walk away from her old life” (Wilkinson 1995, 7).

A review from *Publishers Weekly* for *Sister Water* by Nancy Willard. Excerpt:

“Willard's gift for seamlessly mixing the magical and the mundane puts her in the company of Anne Tyler and Alice Hoffman” (Review of *Sister Water* 1993, 80).

These results open up an entire new world of possibilities to readers other than what librarians might personally know or find in other reference sources. The results of this study allow vendors such as NoveList to evaluate their decisions about which periodicals to include content from, so that the periodicals with the most comparisons are included in the product.

In addition, this study is important because of the current state of readers' advisory in public libraries. In a study of 200 librarians, the most frequent tool that librarians used for readers' advisory was their own personal knowledge (Burgin 1996, 76). As Duncan Smith has pointed out, “It is inappropriate and against our profession's standards of practice to depend exclusively on our personal experiences to respond to requests for information” (Smith 2001, 59). Literary comparisons in book reviews multiply the suggestions that librarians can offer to patrons beyond their own personal reading, which in itself is an unacceptable tool to rely solely on in practice. This study reveals to librarians which periodicals—*Library Journal* and *Booklist*—are the best tools to use, helps vendors decide which periodicals to include in readers' advisory products,

and ultimately will result in the increased use of literary comparisons in book reviews, as librarians themselves write and have the power to improve reviews.

Summary

Book reviews are one of the tools that librarians use in readers' advisory. Literary comparisons in book reviews help librarians assist readers in one of the most challenging aspects of readers' advisory: finding authors and works similar to those a reader has already read and liked. Locating similar authors and works is an even more challenging task during a time of increased publishing and increased demand for readers' advisory in libraries. This content analysis of the use of literary comparisons in fiction book reviews from library and trade book periodicals will allow librarians to determine which periodicals are the best tools for readers' advisory, may assist vendors in evaluating which periodicals to include in readers' advisory databases, and may affect the way that librarians write book reviews. The recommendation of this study is that more comparisons need to be made overall, less neutral comparisons of any sort need to be made, and more qualitative comparisons to works by the same author, works by a different author, and a different author's writing style are needed.

Appendix

TABLE 1

TOTAL NUMBER OF REVIEWS THAT HAVE COMPARISONS
IN ALL PERIODICALS

Have comparisons	No comparisons
262	138
65.50%	34.50%

TABLE 2

TOTAL TYPES OF COMPARISONS MADE IN ALL PERIODICALS

	Number of comparisons	% out of all comparisons in all periodicals
Comparisons to works by the same author	296	76.68%
Comparisons to works by a different author	55	14.25%
Comparisons to a different author's writing style	35	9.07%

TABLE 3

TOTAL NUMBERS OF POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, AND NEUTRAL
COMPARISONS IN ALL PERIODICALS

	Number	% out of all comparisons
Overall number of neutral comparisons made:	197	51.04%
Overall number of positive comparisons made:	155	40.16%
Overall percent of negative comparisons made:	34	8.81%

TABLE 4

TOTAL NUMBERS OF INDIVIDUAL POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, AND NEUTRAL
COMPARISONS IN ALL PERIODICALS

	Number	% out of all comparisons
Neutral comparisons to works by the same author	193	50.00%
Favorable comparisons to works by the same author	79	20.47%
Favorable comparisons to works by a different author	42	10.88%
Favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style	34	8.81%
Negative comparisons to works by the same author	24	6.22%
Negative comparisons to works by a different author	9	2.33%
Neutral comparisons to works by a different author	4	1.04%
Negative comparisons to different author's writing style	1	0.26%
Neutral comparison to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%

TABLE 5

TOTAL NUMBER OF REVIEWS THAT HAVE
COMPARISONS IN EACH PERIODICAL

	Number of reviews that have comparisons	Number of reviews without comparisons	% of reviews in each periodical with comparisons
Library Journal	74	26	74%
Publishers Weekly	70	30	70%
Kirkus	69	31	69%
Booklist	49	51	49%

TABLE 6

PERCENT OF REVIEWS IN EACH PERIODICAL THAT HAVE COMPARISONS
OUT OF TOTAL NUMBER OF COMPARISONS IN ALL PERIODICALS

Library Journal	28.24%
Publishers Weekly	26.72%
Kirkus	26.34%
Booklist	18.70%

TABLE 7

TOTAL NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL COMPARISONS IN ALL PERIODICALS

	Number
Library Journal	118
Publishers Weekly	103
Kirkus	97
Booklist	70

TABLE 8
TYPES OF COMPARISONS IN BOOKLIST

	Number	% out of all comparisons made in Booklist	% out of all comparisons made in all periodicals
Comparisons to works by the same author	40	57.14%	13.47%
Comparisons to works by a different author	22	31.43%	40.74%
Comparisons to a different author's writing style	8	43%	22.86%

TABLE 9
TYPES OF COMPARISONS IN LIBRARY JOURNAL

	Number	% out of all comparisons made in Library Journal	% out of all comparisons made in all periodicals
Comparisons to works by the same author	88	74.58%	29.73%
Comparisons to works by a different author	13	11.02%	23.64%
Comparisons to a different author's writing style	17	14.41%	48.57%

TABLE 10
TYPES OF COMPARISONS IN KIRKUS REVIEWS

	Number	% out of all comparisons made in Kirkus	% out of all comparisons made in all periodicals
Comparisons to works by the same author	78	80.41%	26.35%
Comparisons to works by a different author	12	12.37%	21.82%
Comparisons to a different author's writing style	7	7.22%	20.00%

TABLE 11
TYPES OF COMPARISONS IN PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

	Number	% out of all comparisons made in Publishers Weekly	% out of all comparisons made in all periodicals
Comparisons to works by the same author	92	89.32%	31.08%
Comparisons to works by a different author	8	7.77%	14.55%
Comparisons to a different author's writing style	3	2.91%	8.57%

TABLE 12
POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, AND NEUTRAL COMPARISONS
IN BOOKLIST

	Number	% out of all comparisons in Booklist
Neutral comparisons to works by the same author	26	37.14%
Favorable comparisons to works by the same author	10	14.29%
Negative comparisons to works by the same author	4	5.71%
Neutral comparisons to works by a different author	2	2.86%
Favorable comparisons to works by a different author	14	20.00%
Negative comparisons to works by a different author	6	8.57%
Neutral comparisons to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%
Favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style	8	11.43%
Negative comparisons to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%

TABLE 13
POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, AND NEUTRAL COMPARISONS
IN LIBRARY JOURNAL

	Number	% out of all comparisons in Library Journal
Neutral comparisons to works by the same author	57	48.31%
Favorable comparisons to works by the same author	22	18.64%
Negative comparisons to works by the same author	9	7.63%
Neutral comparisons to works by a different author	0	0.00%
Favorable comparisons to works by a different author	12	10.17%
Negative comparisons to works by a different author	1	0.85%
Neutral comparisons to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%
Favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style	17	14.41%
Negative comparisons to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%

TABLE 14
POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, AND NEUTRAL COMPARISONS
IN KIRKUS REVIEWS

	Number	% out of all comparisons in Kirkus
Neutral comparisons to works by the same author	54	55.67%
Favorable comparisons to works by the same author	20	20.62%
Negative comparisons to works by the same author	3	3.09%
Neutral comparisons to works by a different author	1	1.03%
Favorable comparisons to works by a different author	12	12.37%
Negative comparisons to works by a different author	0	0.00%
Neutral comparisons to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%
Favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style	7	7.22%
Negative comparisons to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%

TABLE 15
POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, AND NEUTRAL COMPARISONS
IN PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

	Number	% out of all comparisons in PW
Neutral comparisons to works by the same author	57	55.34%
Favorable comparisons to works by the same author	27	26.21%
Negative comparisons to works by the same author	8	7.77%
Neutral comparisons to works by a different author	1	0.97%
Favorable comparisons to works by a different author	5	4.85%
Negative comparisons to works by a different author	2	1.94%
Neutral comparisons to a different author's writing style	0	0.00%
Favorable comparisons to a different author's writing style	2	1.94%
Negative comparisons to a different author's writing style	1	0.97%

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