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# Reading Matters in the Academic Library: Taking the Lead from Public Librarians

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# Reading Matters in the Academic Library

## *Taking the Lead from Public Librarians*

*With the increasing virtualization of resources, reference service, and instruction, college students have fewer reasons to visit the academic library, a place they believe lacks relevance in their lives. This article explores the idea of revitalizing academic libraries by reconsidering the place of pleasure reading in them. Considerable research has been conducted on reading in the last quarter century. Reading serves a host of essential functions, far more than we have ever guessed. The first part of this paper looks at the social, psychological, moral, emotional, and cognitive role it plays in our lives. The second half examines readers' advisory services that we can borrow or adapt from public libraries, services that can attract new users, promote lifelong reading, and transform academic libraries to be more community, user, and reader focused.*

**A**cademic libraries have been rapidly changing for some time as resources, reference, and instruction move online. E-resources of all types—books, articles, indexes, reference materials, maps, statistical data, government publications, and videos—are increasing in inverse proportion to the decrease in print/physical materials. Similarly every year, face-to-face reference transactions decline while virtual reference services

expand. Instruction is also undergoing a substantial change in direction. The growth rate for online courses in the United States is currently 21 percent compared to 2 percent for higher education in general.<sup>1</sup> As more students take courses and entire programs online, librarians are increasingly serving a body of distance learners who want customizable, flexible, and technology-based services. Library instruction has started to move online to provide convenient service for off-campus students. It also supplies point-of-need assistance for a generation of students who, as the Horizon report points out, expect “to work, learn, and study wherever and whenever they want. . . . Mobiles contribute to this trend, where increased availability of the Internet feeds the expectation of access.”<sup>2</sup> With collections, reference, and instruction shifting to the virtual realm, our users have less incentive to visit the library. University administrators know that our libraries are attracting fewer people and may find it increasingly difficult to justify the expense of large, underutilized buildings.

Not only do students have fewer reasons to visit us, but they also believe that libraries lack relevance in their lives. According to an OCLC report, libraries are not college students' first

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choice for reading material or research: 66 percent believe bookstores are the best place for current reading materials and 94 percent consider search engines a good fit with their lifestyle.<sup>3</sup>

This article explores the idea of revitalizing academic libraries by reconsidering the place of pleasure reading in them. In the last quarter century, considerable research has been conducted on reading, research that redresses a large gap in our understanding. The first part of this paper looks at what we now know about its many benefits—advantages that are not as well known in the academic library world as the public. The second half examines readers' advisory services that we can borrow from public librarians, services that could attract new users and promote lifelong reading.

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## THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY IN CONTEXT

Before turning to studies on reading, we will briefly look at academic libraries in the wider context of both public libraries and historical circumstances. Public libraries have faced many of the same challenges as their academic counterparts. They too have seen reference queries consistently decline over the last decade. Yet anyone who has visited a public library lately knows that the majority of them are active, bustling places. Public libraries have transformed from warehouses for resources to community-, user-, and reader-centric spaces. Programming such as author readings, activities for newcomers, lectures by experts in various fields, book club meetings, and a wide variety of workshops have all combined to reinvent the public library as a gathering space for community. Public library collections have become more user-driven as videos, audiobooks, CDs, and MP3 books have taken their place alongside the once book-dominated shelves.

Above all, public libraries have become centers for pleasure reading. People, as Saricks points out, "come to libraries for more than stock quotations, health information, and how-to guidance; they also come . . . for stories that challenge, inspire, or take them away when the world becomes too much."<sup>4</sup> Since fiction accounts for roughly 60 percent or more of adult circulation figures,<sup>5</sup> it is not surprising that readers' advisory services have overtaken the reference void. In 2005, Saricks observed that librarians were in the midst of a readers' advisory renaissance.<sup>6</sup> This renaissance has continued, revitalizing these institutions and attracting new customers.

The public library has come a long way from its early days when fiction was disparaged and the mission of the library was to elevate public taste. A century ago, the librarian's job was to move patrons up the reading ladder, assisting them in the progression from lowbrow to highbrow. "Just when the librarian thought that the reader had graduated to philosophical essays and sermons," Ross writes, "he, or often she, would be found reading a novel."<sup>7</sup> But as the twentieth century drew to a close, the public library repositioned itself as community and story space.<sup>8</sup> Readers' advisors' since then have focused on users' interests rather than the advisors' personal ones, and

their mantra is Betty Rosenberg's first law of reading: "Never apologize for your reading tastes."<sup>9</sup>

If public libraries have increasingly promoted reading for pleasure over the course of the last century, academic libraries have moved in the opposite direction. Campus librarians in the 1920s and 1930s believed that the promotion of recreational reading was essential to their mission.<sup>10</sup> In 1927, the director of one university library advised students to make time for leisure reading each week so that they could learn "to know books as friends and to experience the sheer joy of reading."<sup>11</sup> But as the century progressed, there was less time and money for reading promotion. "Part of what may have led to the decline in students' extracurricular reading," argues Elliott, "is an attitude of elitism and even hints of censorship in the name of selection on the part of the librarians recommending the books."<sup>12</sup> With the surge in technology in the 1970s, reading became less fashionable; hence academic libraries started emphasizing digital rather than reading literacy.<sup>13</sup> Today few academic librarians view the promotion of pleasure reading as part of their mandate; even fewer provide readers' advisory services. And yet, as Trott argues, "It is vital that we consider the needs of the readers, viewers, and listeners who come into the library to be as significant as the needs of the information seekers. Too often, both librarians and library users think that finding something to read, view, or listen to is somehow a less serious question than a traditional, fact-based reference question. This attitude reflects a misunderstanding of the importance of story in our users' lives."<sup>14</sup> We need to rethink our mission. Like public librarians, we can transform our libraries to be more community-, user-, and reader-friendly by resurrecting practices that have lain dormant for the past half century.<sup>15</sup>

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## COLLEGE-AGED STUDENTS AND READING

Since the late 1980s, researchers in the fields of psychology, education, library science, and literature have been examining the topic of reading. Their findings have shed light on this hitherto neglected subject area and provided ample evidence of its importance in our lives. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) published three large influential studies on reading in the last decade, studies that have heightened peoples' awareness of its plight in the United States and called attention to its decline in the youth population. The NEA focused on "literary reading" which it defines as the reading of novels, plays, poems, or short stories—either highbrow or lowbrow.<sup>16</sup> In their first report, *Reading at Risk* (2004), the researchers concluded that literary reading had declined from 59.8 percent of youth (aged 18 to 24) to 42.8 percent over the course of twenty years. Moreover, this rate of decline was 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population.<sup>17</sup> In *To Read or Not to Read* (2007), the NEA again concluded that "both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates."<sup>18</sup> Although the third report shows a marked increase in the number of

college-aged youth who read, that number is still down 8 percent from the early 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

Noted author, Ursula K. Le Guin, reminds us that, for most of human history, the vast majority of people were unable to read. Historically, the high point of reading—"the century of the book" as she calls it—was from 1850 to 1950. Expecting to stay at this high point is not realistic. Reading, she observes, "is actual collaboration with the writer's mind. No wonder not everybody is up to it."<sup>20</sup> But academic libraries are a natural place to stem its decline.<sup>21</sup> Reading is the foundation of all studies and the bedrock of communication and critical thinking skills. Those who develop the habit of reading have a greater likelihood of success in their immediate and long-term future. College-aged students are also at a point in their lives when reading can open up worlds—can indeed motivate and inspire them for the future. If students have not developed a love of reading by the time they finish college, they will be less likely to do so later in their lives.

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## BECOMING A READER

Reading is an intricate, complex activity, one that we take for granted when we pick up a book. Reading effortlessly "is a gift conferred on the skilled reader by the harmonious interaction of the myriad processes and subprocesses of reading."<sup>22</sup> Whether reading is a distinctive set of psychological processes or a great variety of them is not definitively known but "its complexity may be as great as that of thinking itself."<sup>23</sup> Reading is hard work. It requires more effort than listening.<sup>24</sup> It also poses far more demands than television; the reader must convert "written text to a language analogue, followed by meaning extraction. Television, on the other hand, provides the viewer with ready-made language and a pictorial representation, which together function as an immediately available meaning structure."<sup>25</sup>

The demanding task of reading requires a long, intense apprenticeship. It takes considerable time to become a proficient pleasure reader, one who effortlessly assimilates vast quantities of narrative.<sup>26</sup> As Ross points out, "Reading is an acquired skill. People learn to read by doing lots and lots of reading."<sup>27</sup> According to Gladwell, "It takes 10,000 hours of practice at anything to become really, really good at it, whether it's playing chess, performing music, doing brain surgery, or playing hockey."<sup>28</sup> What is the secret ingredient that motivates people to put thousands of hours into such activities? The simple answer is enjoyment—"the pleasure of the experience itself that keeps people reading/watching/playing for all the hours needed to become proficient."<sup>29</sup> When people read for pleasure, they painlessly develop the skills necessary to become skilled at it. As Somerset Maugham reminds us, "Who is going to acquire the habit of reading for reading's sake, if he is bidden to read books that bore him?"<sup>30</sup>

Reading for enjoyment, however, has always been viewed with a degree of suspicion in our culture. We look upon pleasure reading as self-indulgent and escapist, and view leisure

readers as lazy and indolent. Puritanism, our work ethic, and a profit-minded society have shaped our beliefs.<sup>31</sup> The more popular a book is, the more we suspect it. If a novel is on a bestseller list, it is immediately dismissed as inferior in quality and detrimental in influence. Yet novelists such as Dickens, who was exceedingly popular during his lifetime, and J. K. Rowling, who has broken all publishing records, demonstrate that this is simply not the case.

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## THE BENEFITS OF READING

Although we have long suspected that avid reading is good for us, it is only in the last quarter century that researchers have begun exploring this idea. People did recognize early on, however, that the collective wisdom of our ancestors is transmitted through stories. "In every literate society," writes Alberto Manguel, "learning to read is something of an initiation, a ritualized passage out of a state of dependency and rudimentary communication. The child learning to read is admitted into the communal memory by way of books."<sup>32</sup> For many years, people believed that such collective insight was transmitted through canonical books, but since the advent of reader response theory, researchers have re-examined the place of all books in our lives. It has become increasingly clear that "readers play a crucial role in enlarging the meaning of the text by reading it within the context of their lives. Through their act of making sense of texts and applying them to their lives, readers creatively rewrite texts."<sup>33</sup> As Gottschall reminds us, readers fill in most of the "color, shading, and texture" to the "line drawing" supplied by an author.<sup>34</sup> Since readers relate most to the parts of a story that speak to their personal experience,<sup>35</sup> and they find meaning "through a vastly entangled method of learned significances, social conventions, previous readings, personal experience and private taste,"<sup>36</sup> any book can resonate with an individual reader. In case studies, readers report that they identify with whatever speaks to their immediate lives and simply skip over the parts not personally meaningful or relevant.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, readers' advisors have shifted attention away from the quality of the book to the quality of the reading experience; as Van Riel, Fowler, and Downes point out, "The best book in the world is quite simply the one you like best."<sup>38</sup>

Researchers have discovered that reading plays an essential social role in our lives. Psychologists have identified a cluster of cognitive adaptations called Theory of Mind that facilitate the construction of our social environments. Theory of Mind is the term used by cognitive psychologists "to describe our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires. Thus we engage in mind-reading when we ascribe to a person a certain mental state on the basis on her observable action."<sup>39</sup> Theory of Mind processes allow us to navigate our social world; reading fiction assists us in this process.<sup>40</sup> Individuals with autism cannot imagine the thoughts of others or infer mental states from their behaviors. In general, people acquire this ability after

the age of four; children who read more have superior Theory of Mind abilities.<sup>41</sup> Researchers have discovered that when we read about a character performing an action, the same area of the brain is activated as when we perform that action ourselves.<sup>42</sup> Our understanding of a character's thoughts and actions depends on our making our own inward version of them.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, we adopt perspectives we would not otherwise entertain in real life. We "walk a mile" in others' shoes, imagining what it is like to think and feel as another person. By imagining the hidden mental states of others and experiencing their emotions, we increase our understanding of the inner core and individuality of other people.<sup>44</sup> A work of fiction in essence "provides a sand box for imagining others identities and choices."<sup>45</sup> Reading novels sensitizes us to the needs of others and deepens our insight into their motivations, even those towards whom we might previously have felt nothing.<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, recent research has demonstrated that reading fiction significantly improves our social skills and is associated with superior abilities in Theory of Mind.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, exposure to fiction, unlike exposure to nonfiction, promotes social ability according to the research of psychology professor Raymond Mar.<sup>48</sup>

When people read stories, the same signals are sent to their nervous systems that would be transmitted in the corresponding real-life situation.<sup>49</sup> The reader loses awareness of the self as a distinct being and "becomes" the story characters.<sup>50</sup> The more readers participate in a narrative, the more they identify with and feel empathy for the characters in it.<sup>51</sup> When readers sympathize with fictional characters from a variety of backgrounds and cultures and with characters whose experiences, beliefs, and ideas differ from their own, they engage in a simulation of real-world encounters.<sup>52</sup> Experiencing empathy towards those outside our social groupings is essential for furthering human rights worldwide.<sup>53</sup> Stories are, in fact, the "glue and grease" that bind societies.<sup>54</sup> As Taylor observes, "Story is our best hope for flying over the chasms that separate individuals, races, genders, ages (and ages), cultures, classes, and the myriad other differences that render us unique."<sup>55</sup>

Researchers have also studied the way readers are transported to fictional worlds. Transportation is a phenomenon common to all readers who are absorbed by what they read: "Instead of seeing activity in their physical surroundings, transported readers see the action of the story unfolding before them. These readers react emotionally to events that are simply words on the page."<sup>56</sup> They become "temporary citizens" of the story world.<sup>57</sup> When readers are absorbed in the experience, the perception of the mechanics of reading totally disappears.<sup>58</sup> The focus of the reader shifts away from self thereby changing the content of consciousness and mediating mood.<sup>59</sup> As readers turn their attention to characters' lives, they are released from stress, anxiety, and personal problems.<sup>60</sup> Absorption in someone else's story also allows individuals to view their concerns in a broader perspective, thus encouraging them to reframe their lives and consider alternatives to entrenched ways of thinking.<sup>61</sup> As readers get

outside themselves and view their lives from enlarged contexts, they become more self-aware. Indeed, stories provide "perspective, point of view, angle of vision, alternative perception and new information."<sup>62</sup>

Because pleasure reading transports us to other worlds and allows us to adopt a variety of perspectives, it can function as a dress rehearsal for life. We can try out other ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Fiction can operate as a testing ground for our future selves and a model of coping strategies.<sup>63</sup> We can escape the limitations of our personal experience by simulating other models; reading is in fact "practice for life."<sup>64</sup> Gottschall argues that all stories focus on problems, thereby giving readers practice in dealing with life's struggles.<sup>65</sup> Not only do we confront a wider range of experiences than we do in real life, but we do so in a safe environment. Identifying with the hero of a dangerous adventure, for example, can provide a trial run for being courageous in life. The more we practice thinking and acting like heroic characters, the closer we come to attaining our ideals. By imagining fictional possibilities, we also foster creativity, an essential element in problem solving.<sup>66</sup>

What gives reading its potency is its ability to engage our feelings. Oatley points out that "emotion is to fiction as truth is to science. We would no sooner read a novel that did not move us, than an empirical article that did not offer a validly drawn conclusion. . . . By means of the story our emotions may be transformed by having them deepened or understood better."<sup>67</sup> Authors are skilled in conveying emotions in words. Until we identify the language for feelings, we do not register them in our consciousness. Fictional works help us discover emotions by expressing them for us. These emotions are often difficult for most people to "to put into language. Stories express feelings we recognize, and permit us to identify them, to experience them in language. Because they get expressed in language they become for readers . . . conscious."<sup>68</sup> We cannot process and deal with emotions until we articulate them.

One of the most important functions of story is to help make sense of the world by giving readers a map and an organizational model.<sup>69</sup> "To escape the feeling of helplessness and confusion that we carry with us," Gold writes, "we need to organize, package, index our experience, do what we mean when we when we say 'get a handle on it,' so that we can carry the baggage of our experience comfortably and not have bits and pieces falling all over the place."<sup>70</sup> By organizing information into a unified whole, story provides a model, "an identifiable shape, for the accumulation of thoughts and feelings scattered around the workshop of . . . [our] mind."<sup>71</sup> We store knowledge and experience as stories, grouping similar ones together and indexing them for future retrieval. By doing so, we can make sense of new situations and lessen the burden of understanding unfamiliar events.<sup>72</sup>

Since stories order and unify, they provide prototypes of meaning for our lives. "We hunger for stories of all kinds, argues Taylor, "because we are trying to figure out the plot and theme of our own story and are eager for hints."<sup>73</sup> Viewing our lives in terms of a narrative rather than as a series of



random, unrelated events, gives us a sense of purpose and direction.<sup>74</sup> We have the power to shape and alter our own narratives and create our own identities. A nonnarrative organism, argues Gold, “might experience a moment-by-moment set of disconnected responses to sensory data,” but a human being constructs “a story model of itself as an active, aware, influential, choosing, recording, planning, organizing and aware-of-feeling ‘I.’ The ‘I’ is a combination of the self and language, language used to construct a running record of personal experience that creates identity.”<sup>75</sup>

Reading, as we have seen, transmits the collective wisdom of our ancestors, improves social skills, increases self-knowledge, fosters empathy, advances human rights, provides a dress rehearsal for life, develops creativity, articulates emotions that help us cope with them, organizes experience, provides a prototype of meaning for our lives, and assists in identity formation. It also facilitates our intellectual development. The more people read for pleasure, the more cognitive benefits they receive. When they get “hooked on books,” they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called language skills many people are so concerned about.<sup>76</sup> Research shows that reading shapes cognitive development by increasing comprehension, writing skill, vocabulary, and grammatical development.<sup>77</sup> Language in stories “provides many opportunities for the learning of words and concepts and nuances of meaning, all of which may stimulate the development of intelligence.”<sup>78</sup> Reading also promotes articulate expression, higher order reasoning, and critical thinking.<sup>79</sup> It can nurture our capacity for extended linear thought, a particularly essential skill in an age of increasing electronic distractions.<sup>80</sup> Reading fiction encourages the prioritization of book-length reading.<sup>81</sup> It helps us “understand that sound bites are at best not the full story and may be misleading.”<sup>82</sup> Readers can learn about the world from fiction as well as nonfiction. Stories convey information in a more engaging manner than any other type of discourse. As Schutte and Malouff observe, educational material “conveyed in story form has special appeal because stories can make information more interesting and can provide connections between an individual’s prior knowledge base and new information.”<sup>83</sup> Reading fiction provides “more easily remembered, pleasurable received information than any other activity.”<sup>84</sup>

Novels have the power to change us and completely transform our lives.<sup>85</sup> As Smith points out, “reading emails, newspapers, magazines, company reports, and messages on cell phones may extend our knowledge, and even sharpen our reading skills. But they don’t change us. Reading stories can make a difference to our life.”<sup>86</sup> Committed readers in Ross’s study said that books had been able to change their perspective, provide a new model for living, help them see life differently, offer an enlarged set of possibilities, provide motivation, give them inner strength, and instill courage to make a change.<sup>87</sup> Reading, as Miedema observes, “is the making of a deeper self.”<sup>88</sup> Up until now, studies in the field have relied on subjects reading small amounts of fiction. However, the cumulative effect of stories read throughout a lifetime may

be even greater than we have thought, shaping us “in the way that flowing water gradually reshapes a rock.”<sup>89</sup> What Le Guin wrote so memorably about fantasy more than thirty years ago applies to all stories: “A fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and it will change you.”<sup>90</sup>

Reading serves a host of essential functions, far more than we have ever guessed. It plays a vitally important social, psychological, moral, emotional, cognitive, intellectual, inspirational, and adaptive role in our lives. Our minds are so constructed as to be attracted to narrative and to create stories out of our experiences.<sup>91</sup> The narratives that we read have such a powerful effect on our lives that they become indistinguishable from our core being. Individuals “read themselves into the story and then read the story into their lives, which then becomes a part of them.”<sup>92</sup> The stories that people read “can become so woven into their knowledge, their wisdom, their residue of self-efficacy apparatus that they cannot distinguish it from other personal experience.”<sup>93</sup> As Gottschall concludes, “We live in Neverland because we can’t not live in Neverland. Neverland is our nature. We are the storytelling animal.”<sup>94</sup> Humankind is in effect “a story species,” a people who both shapes and are shaped by stories.<sup>95</sup>

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## HOW DOES THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY BENEFIT FROM PROMOTING READING?

Recreational reading certainly benefits the individual in numerous ways, but the promotion of it can serve the library’s interest too. Since research has shown that people equate libraries with books,<sup>96</sup> we can capitalize on this opportunity “by expanding the value they offer to readers, viewers, and listeners who use our libraries.”<sup>97</sup> As Trott suggests, we can increase our base and attract new users by serving their reading interests.<sup>98</sup> Given the fact that college students use libraries less in an electronic age and believe these institutions lack relevance in their lives, we need to give them reasons to return.<sup>99</sup> Public libraries have been in the forefront of the shift from product to user.<sup>100</sup> As Woodward points out, “It doesn’t matter what marvelous resources we have if customers don’t use them.”<sup>101</sup> Libraries that have created browsing rooms have found that they serve as a hook for students and create a welcoming atmosphere. Attracting students to the library can also help justify to our parent institutions “the vast investment in real estate” that academic libraries require.<sup>102</sup> An emerging trend in the academic world is student engagement; by re-envisioning the library as a center for engagement,<sup>103</sup> we help advance the mission of our parent institutions.

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## WHAT CONSTITUTES PLEASURE READING?

If we want to promote reading in academic libraries, we need to know what we should collect. A variety of fiction that appeals to a range of users and includes both popular and

literary works is a good place to start. A number of academic libraries have created popular reading collections, buying books specifically for them in genres such as mystery, horror, science fiction, romance, adventure, thriller, and fantasy. Libraries that do not have the budget or mandate for this type of collection can serve leisure readers with items they already own. Fiction selected for English courses and the increasing number of popular fiction and culture courses could also be enjoyed by recreational readers.<sup>104</sup> In the last decade, public librarians have turned their attention to whole collection advisory in order to serve viewers, listeners, and readers.<sup>105</sup> Popular movies, audiobooks, current music, and other items could attract new users to the academic library. As video rental stores go out of business, libraries can help fill this niche.

Readers' advisory services in public libraries initially focused on fiction, paying far less attention to nonfiction. As Neal Wyatt has pointed out, nonfiction readers' advisory is "a world of uncharted territory we are only now beginning to explore."<sup>106</sup> Those who prefer nonfiction do not distinguish between reading for information and reading for pleasure; the appeal is not always utilitarian. Indeed fiction and nonfiction are not necessarily opposing types; research has demonstrated that readers can be transported by both types of reading.<sup>107</sup> Shearer reminds us, "Some works of fiction have remarkably little fiction in them and . . . some works of fact are shaped like imaginative works."<sup>108</sup> Like successful fiction writers, authors of absorbing nonfiction works "tell a good story, develop characters, set a scene, and create suspense."<sup>109</sup> Nonfiction also draws in readers because they enjoy:

- learning something new
- experiencing the intellectual stimulation
- indulging in vicarious experiences
- stretching their imaginations
- engaging in serendipitous discovery
- participating in the spirit of inquiry participate
- identifying with people in biographies and autobiographies
- experiencing the sense of real life
- indulging their curiosity
- dreaming of possibilities beyond the ordinary
- being transported to another time and place<sup>110</sup>

"The veracity and authenticity of nonfiction," suggests Carr, "can touch our emotional, ethical, and logical centers."<sup>111</sup>

Narrative nonfiction—"a style of nonfiction writing that adheres to the facts, but employs the literary techniques of fiction to tell a vibrant story about real events, phenomenon, people, and places"<sup>112</sup>—is especially suited to pleasure reading. Examples of narrative nonfiction can be found in biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, true crimes, travelogues, survival stories, true adventures, and exposés of social issues.<sup>113</sup> Goodreads' Listopias and nonfiction prize lists such as the Pulitzer, ALA Notable Nonfiction, and National Book Critics Circle can provide selectors with book suggestions.<sup>114</sup>

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## THE INVISIBILITY OF BOOKS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

The increasing popularity of specialized cable television such as the Discovery Channel and the History Channel speaks to people's appetite for nonfiction.<sup>115</sup> Academic libraries are filled with thousands of nonfiction books that can appeal to this growing audience. The sad reality is that most of these books are collecting dust in the stacks. Indeed in a "universe of expanding choices among multiple media, attracting the attention of the reader is increasingly difficult"; readers must be motivated to select reading over numerous activities that compete for their attention.<sup>116</sup> If a patron does decide to visit a college library, finding a suitable book is no easy feat. In her study of avid readers, Ross concluded that appropriate reading choices became a self-reinforcing system while unsuccessful ones killed the desire to read.<sup>117</sup> Our public library colleagues understand this fact and have developed numerous ways to help readers make effective choices. Creating a variety of "scaffolding devices that make it easier for readers to recognize the nature of the experience offered by particular books" assists our users in the selection process.<sup>118</sup>

In the college library, books have become invisible, hidden away in endless rows on multiple floors. Many people enter libraries as browsers, eager to find a book they will enjoy. Faced with overwhelming choice, only our most persevering patrons find the leisure reading material they want. In a recent study, Gilbert and Fister found that college students take great pleasure in reading and "would welcome efforts from libraries to help them discover reading material."<sup>119</sup> Public librarians have been very successful in devising strategies to both promote reading for pleasure and help readers funnel their choices to a manageable number. By adopting and adapting these strategies, we too can assist our patrons and promote lifelong reading.

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## READERS' ADVISORY SERVICES AND STRATEGIES

In the past fifty years, very few academic librarians have provided readers' advisory service, believing it to be a public library initiative—a service outside the scope of their mandate. Gilbert and Fister's study reveals that a majority of librarians are ambivalent about promoting reading in academic libraries, believing that students do not particularly enjoy this pastime.<sup>120</sup> Some academic libraries are challenging the status quo, reevaluating traditional assumptions and reconsidering pleasure reading "as a lifelong habit rather than simply a research stop along the way."<sup>121</sup>

A staple of readers' advisory service is the one-on-one consultation in which a patron asks for reading recommendations. Public librarians expect such queries and train for them. Academic librarians receive far fewer inquiries and are often intimidated by the thought of them. Yet students do come to the desk looking for leisure reading material,

particularly at the beginning and end of term. Trott points out that answering readers' advisory questions is very similar to answering reference questions, and that there are tools to help librarians in both situations. Just as librarians do not have to read all the informational material in the library to be skilled at reference queries, they do not have to read all the leisure books to be effective at readers' advisory. What college librarians do need though is training; our library schools should be preparing us to answer readers' advisory questions by teaching the necessary tools and strategies.<sup>122</sup> Academic libraries need to subscribe to online tools such as NoveList or What Do I Read Next, bookmark sites such as Whichbook.net, and buy readers' advisory reference tools such as the Genreflecting series, the ALA Readers' Advisory series, and Nancy Pearl's Now Read This set of books. These tools can assist librarians; we, in turn, can teach our patrons (especially those who prefer to self-serve) how to use them. Particularly useful for academic libraries are nonfiction reference works such as Neal Wyatt's *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Nonfiction*.<sup>123</sup>

Assisting students who specifically ask for help benefits the small proportion of those who come to the desk. Many others would read for pleasure if we made it easy and convenient for them to find what they want. Public libraries have followed the lead of bookstores by creating themed displays that not only attract users by their visibility in high traffic areas but also give readers a manageable focus for selecting items. Research has shown that a high proportion of fiction readers are browsers.<sup>124</sup> These readers are not sure what they want and are looking for ideas. Materials in public library display units circulate heavily; these are often items that would have gone unnoticed in the stacks. Academic libraries have overlooked the power of limited choice that display areas provide.<sup>125</sup> The simple act of turning a book face out makes the invisible visible and offers a focal point for users. Not all displays are created equal. A locked glass case of rare books—the typical display in a college library foyer—has a “don't-touch-me” quality about it.<sup>126</sup>

What we need are open and inviting display areas filled with items meant to circulate. Themed displays that include both fiction and nonfiction bring together items from different parts of the collection. A display on crime could include true crime books, mystery novels, and works on criminology; one on World War I could contain historical books, biographies, survival stories, memoirs, and historical fiction. Public librarians have created eclectic and engaging displays on themes such as “a sense of place,” “good books you may have missed,” “journeys,” “books for a long winter night,” “open ticket: read your way around the world,” and “books we're passionate about.”<sup>127</sup> One college library created a display called “What college students are reading!” using the monthly survey from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Messages such as “Pick me! Pick me!” and “Curl up with me tonight—Take me home today!” were inserted in each book.<sup>128</sup> Other libraries are a great source of ideas for display themes. Month-long displays of between twenty and fifty items have worked well in public libraries. Staff need to restock the unit

as items are borrowed and should leave spots deliberately open on shelves to avoid an overly formal impression that discourages borrowing.<sup>129</sup>

“Location, location, location,” must be our concern when it comes to displays. Books should be the first items users notice when they enter our doors and the last ones they spot when they leave. Marketing experts know that first impressions are vital to the success of any enterprise. In fact, 80 percent of our impression of a new space is based on what we see immediately.<sup>130</sup> Unfortunately many academic libraries contain no books in their foyers; these buildings often have an institutional feel that does nothing to entice readers. Anyone visiting a bookstore finds it difficult to ignore the appeal of books. Although these buildings are often nothing more than inexpensive warehouses, they are transformed into attractive spaces by the clever use of book displays. If tempting displays take the place of costly architecture in bookstores,<sup>131</sup> consider how effective they could be in academic libraries.

Bookstore owners and public librarians know that books with beautiful covers are the single most important element in an eye-catching display. Publishers invest considerable money in cover designs. These book jackets are created by professional designers who are skilled at targeting the right audience.<sup>132</sup> The covers' attractive appearance not only entices people to buy them but also provides the essential information a reader needs to make a wise selection. Who says you cannot judge a book by its cover? Ross found that avid readers made successful reading choices by using the clues provided by book packaging.<sup>133</sup> Plot summary, author information, and snippets from reviews are all necessary clues for informed decision-making. Academic librarians should follow the example of their public library counterparts by protecting book jackets with Mylar overlays instead of tossing them out.

To create lifelong readers, academic libraries need to attract both existing and potential users to the activity. Bookstore corporations carefully control the overall bookstore experience. For too long, academic libraries have paid scant attention to the library experience. Our patrons have told us they want cafes where they can read and relax, reading rooms where they can sit on comfortable chairs, and popular reading collections that they can browse.<sup>134</sup> Academic libraries that have implemented such features have been very successful; in fact, librarians have commented that popular reading rooms and collections are the most heavily used in the library.<sup>135</sup> We can also appeal to readers by advertising in ways that retailers do. Academic librarians have tended to associate marketing with “crass commercialization,” a view that hampers efforts to attract users.<sup>136</sup> “Clever advertisers promote their products and services,” observed Van Riel, Fowler, and Downes, “by helping consumers imagine themselves using them.”<sup>137</sup> We need to target our readers' needs and provide them with a vision of the reading experience. Moving from a book-centric to a reader-centric perspective will help what retailers call “selling the sizzle, not the sausage.” U.K. public librarians have done so by creating a series of successful promotional campaigns. The posters designed for their “Give me a break”



promotion ask, “Do you fancy a short break, a long break, a surprise break?” Reading is cleverly depicted as an oasis from the stress of everyday life. The “Take your seat” campaign links chairs to a variety of reading situations: a wicker chair in a garden (“relaxing and fresh”), a seat on a train (“travelling companions”), a bed (“3 am reads”). The “Get lost, Get a grip, Get a life” promotion celebrates “the nature of the reading experience—selling the sizzle of completely losing yourself in a story, having an edge of the seat experience, or stepping totally into somebody else’s shoes.”<sup>138</sup> Providing readers with an inviting image of what they will experience can be a powerful motivator.

Displays organized around innovative themes are one way of giving readers a manageable focus for selection. Bookmarks and booklists can do the same. Public library patrons make effective use of such aids; college students have said they would find these supports helpful in providing reading ideas.<sup>139</sup> Booklists allow for annotations that provide readers information for selection. Bookmarks are also handy tools for readers and inexpensive to produce.<sup>140</sup> They are less work for librarians since there is no space for annotations. Bookmarks are best suited to topics with a narrow focus and are particularly useful for read-alike suggestions (if you liked this author, try these....).

Booklists and bookmarks are convenient for people who visit the building, but traffic in an academic library is increasingly virtual. Electronic book lists and blogs posted on the library site can stimulate interest in reading for pleasure. Reading maps, a variation on the booklist idea, are web-based visual journeys of the reading experience. They are based on the idea of concept mapping, allowing patrons to follow various threads of interest from a book or topic. A reading map can point to websites, similar fiction, nonfiction, podcasts, interviews, and a variety of media; it is, in fact, a visual and holistic way of promoting the collection.<sup>141</sup> Reading maps can be created on a variety of topics, for example Regency England, exploration, the Crusades, and Arthurian legend.<sup>142</sup> They can be produced at no cost from a website such as Spicynodes ([www.spicynodes.org](http://www.spicynodes.org)).

In an increasingly virtual world, the library website is the front door that matters. The proliferation of mobile devices has created an expanding audience of remote users. Academic library sites and catalogs lag far behind both public libraries and online booksellers in appealing to potential readers. We need to provide a virtual browsing experience comparable with in-person browsing.<sup>143</sup> Scrolling virtual shelves of recommended books is a commonplace feature of public library sites. Large online booksellers use an algorithm that creates personalized recommendations for its customers. The social networking book site Goodreads has started doing the same. Readers now expect reading recommendations from book-related enterprises. Many public libraries use catalogues that provide, not just virtual browsing of their shelves, but also uploading of reader reviews, rating of books, linking to professional reviews, and sharing of personal booklists. Academic libraries risk both turning readers away and being

sidelined if they do not participate.

Fostering a culture of reading is an essential step in promoting the activity. Reading involves a significant social component to which the more than 12 million Goodreads members can attest. This organization (and tenth largest social networking site) is thriving because readers love to share their reading preferences and ideas.<sup>144</sup> “Every once in a while,” Goodreads observes, “you run into a friend who tells you about this ‘great new book I’m reading.’ And suddenly you’re excited to read it.”<sup>145</sup> This is the kind of enthusiasm that academic libraries need to generate. As the title of the Ontario Public Library Association’s 2012 Reader’s Advisory Conference suggests, “Reading Builds Communities.” Students want to be a part of the “buzz”; they have said they would love to know what other classmates are reading.<sup>146</sup> Librarians can stimulate a culture of reading by creating, promoting, and facilitating in-person and online book clubs, author readings and discussion, and one-book-one-community events. Such book-related undertakings transform reading from an invisible and often unnoticed activity to a participatory event. Indeed a half-million people in the United States alone are estimated to be members of book clubs.<sup>147</sup> Sharing responses to a book can deepen our understanding of it and enrich the reading experience.<sup>148</sup> Public librarians have had great success with organizing, facilitating, providing the venue, and creating kits for book discussion groups. These kits can include multiple copies of a book, a book discussion guide, a list of “read-alikes” or “read-about,” tips for moderating a discussion, and a list of online reviews and related sites.<sup>149</sup> Libraries can create their own online book clubs and reading forums through Goodreads. Such online ventures provide anonymity—a freeing and equalizing force for many readers. External factors such as gender, age, and appearance are unimportant in online environments, and challenges due to mobility, accessibility, and geographic distance are eliminated.<sup>150</sup>

We want our users to see the library as the “place to be” and a center for engagement. Promoting reading as a fun, relaxing, and social activity will increase the likelihood that the library will be perceived as relevant for its community. Lifelong reading is not just pleasurable; it has civic, social, and economic consequences. Research has shown that those who engage in pleasure reading are more likely to vote, do volunteer work, play sports, attend sporting events, engage in outdoor activities, attend plays or concerts, visit museums, attain higher levels of education, and work in more financially rewarding jobs.<sup>151</sup> We need to play an essential readers’ advisory role in both promoting reading for pleasure and helping students manage the selection process. Libraries must also be more proactive in meeting the student-centred strategic goals of their parent institutions.<sup>152</sup> When it comes to reading, we cannot be passive any longer.

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