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10-15-2014

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Pauline Dewan

Wilfrid Laurier University, pdewan@wlu.ca

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Recommended Citation

Dewan, Pauline. "Adopting Readers' Advisory Practices in the Academic Library." Open Shelf, October 2014, <http://www.open-shelf.ca/readers-advisory-academic/>

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Adopting Readers' Advisory Practices in the Academic Library¹

Over the course of the past century, public libraries have increasingly promoted reading for pleasure while academic libraries have moved away from doing so. Campus librarians in the 1920s and 30s believed that promoting recreational reading was essential to their mission (Zauha, 1993). Yet today few academic librarians view the promotion of pleasure reading as part of their mandate; even fewer provide readers' advisory services. Reading for pleasure has always been viewed with a degree of suspicion in our culture, and nowhere more so than in higher education. Pleasure reading has traditionally been considered escapist; and leisure readers, indolent. Our beliefs have been shaped by a work-dominated, profit-minded society.

Reading for pleasure matters

However, researchers in the fields of psychology, education, library science, and literature are increasingly pointing to the important role that reading plays in our lives. If we want to encourage lifelong reading, we must remember that it is not a skill we automatically acquire. When we read effortlessly, we see beyond words on a page – but attaining this skill level requires a long, intense apprenticeship. As Catherine Ross (2006) observes, “Reading is an acquired skill. People learn to read by doing lots and lots of reading” (p. 45). Reading books for pleasure is what motivates people to devote hours of practice to this activity. Students who establish the habit of reading nurture essential communication and critical thinking skills that are essential to success in school and beyond. If they have not developed a love of reading by the time they finish university or college, they will be less likely to do so later in their lives.

Promoting reading in academic libraries

Many people enter libraries as browsers, eager to find a book they will enjoy. In the academic library, books are invisible, hidden away in numerous rows on multiple floors. Faced

with overwhelming choice, only the most persevering patrons find the leisure reading material they want. 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 or adapting these strategies, academic librarians can also assist leisure readers and promote lifelong reading.

When students have leisure time, some of them inquire at the desk where they can find a good book to read. Just as librarians do not have to read all the informational material in the library to be skilled at reference queries, neither must they read all the leisure books to be effective at readers' advisory. What academic librarians do need, though, is readers' advisory training and reference resources.

Assisting students who specifically ask for help benefits the small proportion of those who come to the desk. Others would seek out leisure reading material if librarians helped make it 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. What academic libraries need are open and inviting display units filled with items intended to circulate, not locked away in glass cases. Themed displays that include both fiction and non-fiction bring together items from different parts of the collection. A display on crime, for example, could include true crime books, mystery novels, and works on criminology.

Bookstore owners and public librarians know that books with beautiful covers are the single most important element in an eye-catching display. Their attractive appearance entices people to choose them and provides the essential information a reader needs to make a selection. Who says you cannot judge a book by its cover? Ross (2001) found that avid readers made

successful reading choices by using clues provided by book packaging. Plot summary, author information, and snippets from reviews are all necessary 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 little attention to the “library experience” (Woodward, 2005). Our patrons would love cafés where they can read and relax, reading rooms where they can sit on comfortable chairs, and popular reading collections that they can browse. Academic libraries that have implemented such features have been very successful. Librarians can further stimulate a culture of reading by creating, promoting and/or facilitating: in-person and online book clubs, author readings/discussion, and one-book-one-community events. Such book-related undertakings transform reading from an invisible activity to a social event.

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. Scrolling virtual shelves of recommended books is a commonplace feature of public library sites. Goodreads and large online booksellers use an algorithm that creates personalized recommendations for its customers. Readers now expect such recommendations from book-related enterprises. Many public libraries use catalogues that provide, not just virtual browsing of their shelves, but also spaces for reader reviews, rating of books, linking to professional reviews, and sharing of personal booklists. Academic libraries risk being sidelined if they do not participate.

We want our users to see the library as the “place to be” and a centre 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 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). We need to play an essential readers’ advisory role in both promoting reading for pleasure and helping students manage the selection process.

¹ This article has been adapted from its longer version in *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 52.4 (2013).

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