University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange

School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works

School of Information Sciences

9-1-2006

Readers Who Like this Book

Carol Tenopir
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation

Readers Who Like This Book

By Carol Tenopir

I LIKE RECREATIONAL SUMMER reading and quickly go through the newest books of my favorite contemporary authors and look for titles with similar themes. Readers' advisory librarians use a plethora of book resources to help readers like me find new authors and interesting titles. The books in the "Genreflecting Advisory Series" published by Libraries Unlimited are key resources, with over 20 volumes that provide a guide to reading in every genre—from historical fiction to Westerns to romances. Other well-establshed book-finding sites include NoveList and WhichBook.

Reader's Advisor Online

The "Genreflecting" series is now available as The Reader's Advisor Online (RAO) database (www.readersadvisoronline.com), seeking to "bring books and readers together." The titles have been woven into a database that can help readers find genre fiction, literary fiction, or recreational nonfiction books of interest.

The database makes use of topic maps to browse by genre (e.g., crime fiction), subgenre (e.g., mystery and detective stories), and appeals (e.g., police detectives). Sometimes this goes several layers deep—police detectives are also subdivided into "lone-wolf police detectives," "detection specialists," and "police procedurals." Libraries Unlimited promises that the hierarchical topic map taxonomy will be made available to libraries in the future. For now, users can view or browse through each genre and click to view, browse, or search on the more specific lower levels.

Advanced search also allows searching by keyword, author, title, series, and year of publication. A drop-down list of nine "reading interests" (primarily for North American readers) allows a search to be limited to interests such as "native American," "Canadian," "Latino," etc. Genre, subgenres, or appeals can be used as a simple way to browse through interesting titles or can be incorporated into an advanced search. I entered "California" in the full-text search box, restricted my search to 2000–2006, and selected "police detectives" from the genre listing. The search was easy to enter and returned 19 book records.

Each record describes a book that meets the search criteria but also includes a "related reads" section that describes similar detectives or similar authors. "Also consider" in a record provides further tips for finding similar titles of possible interest. For example, "Fans of police procedurals, in which the emphasis is on the investigation of crimes, might also enjoy a variety of detective novels that explain their protagonists' investigative techniques, as well as detection specialist stories featuring forensic or medical specialist investigators."

The layered approach to finding interesting titles is a strength of RAO. From a simple genre or subgenre browse to a complex search, users can follow many paths to learn about interesting books. There are often links to continue the search process.

My main objection is that many of these titles are not in my local library. Readers get lots of recommendations, but a limit to local library availability is an obvious narrowing criterion for light reading. The database must be linked to the library catalog to complete the advisory process.

Public librarians are the main audience for RAO. Laura Calderone, managing editor, electronic products, for Libraries Unlimited, told me they "expect that many subscribing libraries will provide access via the online database page or OPAC and that some patrons may use [it] after seeing a librarian use the product, but [we] consider primary users to be librarians performing readers' advisory service."

Library subscriptions are based on the number of constituents, ranging from a low of $295 per year for small school libraries to $795 per year for large academic or public libraries. Bookstore prices are based on the number of branches, and the single store price is $295.

Amazon.com differs

Amazon's approach to readers' advisory relies on buying patterns and buying statistics. It assumes that buyers of a particular book title have similar interests and that if a buyer purchases more than one book, other purchasers of one of those books will find the other titles also of interest. Unlike RAO's operation, Amazon's is an automatic process that is updated every time a book is purchased. It starts with a purchase or seed title to match copurchases by others with that seed title.

Although I can imagine a library product that works similarly by using a library's borrowing statistics to recommend other books coborrowed with a title a user starts with, Libraries Unlimited did not take this approach. According to Calderone, "Our approach relies on the judgment of our authors and users: we recommend similar titles in our related reads and readalike sections and also make it easy for the librarian to find related titles based on appeals, genres, and subjects."

This ability to find what the experts think about related titles is the real strength of The Reader's Advisor Online and what makes it a unique tool for libraries and bookstores.

> From a simple genre or subgenre browse to a complex search, users can follow many paths to find interesting books

Carol Tenopir (ctenopir@utk.edu) is Professor at the School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville