

“Wasting Time on Romances”: Uncommon Ground in Reader Advisory Education and Professional Practice

Introduction

[Mary Bly Vignette]

Reader Advisory Education in ALA-Accredited LIS Programs

Do we teach our masters’ students about reader advisory services? Well, the majority of schools offer a class that is either explicitly oriented toward Reader Advisory or includes Reader Advisory as a significant element. We conducted an informal review of course descriptions at 50 out of 56 LIS programs, and of those 50, 30 programs offered a total of 48 reader advisory or reader-advisory related courses. Eleven of those courses were specifically titled “Reader Advisory,” and the 38 “related” courses generally had titles like “Materials and Services for Adults” or “History of the Book.”

There’s the positive news: 60% of LIS programs offer a course that deals with reader advisory. The less-positive news is that those 48 courses comprised less than 2% of the 3,176 master’s level courses listed by those 50 schools.

What do we teach in these classes? Teaching goes in two directions, practical and theoretical. On the practical side, several course descriptions mentioned the reader advisory interview, reader advisory resources, and unspecified “techniques and processes” for reader advisory work. The theoretical side of these classes emphasizes “reading theory,” “popular culture,” and “the role of fiction” in libraries and for readers.

The Practice of Reader Advisory: Real Librarians’ Stories

With funding provided by the Romance Writers of America, we sent a survey out to 1020 public libraries to find out how they dealt with romance novels. We received usable returns from 396 libraries, for a 39% return rate. Responses came from libraries in 48 states.

That survey elicited interesting quantitative and qualitative results. On the quantitative side, we learned that some public libraries carry and promote romance, while others do not.

- 63% have romance collections
- 56% offer romance reader advisory services (They don’t mention how many people take advantage of that service.)
- 55% make general reader advisory tools available
- 41% have romance displays
- 23% carry romance-specific reader advisory tools such as the book *Love in the Stacks*
- 13% host romance author visits
- 8% carry romance-oriented journals such as *Romantic Times*
- 6% host romance discussion groups

These findings support the idea that public libraries are taking “the path of least resistance” toward romance novels and romance promotion. There is relatively little pain in making romance-specific reader advisory service available in addition to the standard reader advisory service, making general reader advisory tools available, or putting up a display. As romance

promotion gets more time- and labor-intensive, however, libraries' commitment to those services drop off.

In addition to these things, we also wanted to learn something about our respondents' romance reading habits. Of our respondents:

- 53% read romances "rarely" or "never"
- 47% read romances "sometimes" or "often"

In more specific terms:

- 48% read between 1 and 5 romances per month, while
- 5% read more than six romances per month

When we asked *why* they read romances,

- 50% of our respondents said they did so only for personal reasons, while
- 27% did so for work-related reasons like providing reader advisory services.

This suggests that most library romance readers are "in the closet" as far as their professional practice goes, a conclusion further supported by the evidence that

- 53% of respondents talked about romance novels with their colleagues "rarely" or "never," as compared to the
- 43% who did so "sometimes" or "often."

It's something of a cold comfort to know that they're also "in the closet" at home, where 66% "rarely" or "never" talk about romance novels to their friends. It's possible they feel more comfortable talking about books with other "book people," regardless of genre.

Now let me explain what this has to do with LIS education. Only 61% of our respondents indicated that they were MLS librarians. Another 38% had different educational backgrounds, from high school graduates to people with master's and doctoral degrees in other fields. This allowed us to make a few comparisons between people who had the traditional MLS education and those who hadn't. Of our respondents:

- 53% of non-MLS respondents "rarely" or "never" read romance, compared to 52% of MLS-holders

The percentage of MLS and non-MLS respondents who "sometimes" or "often" read romance was exactly the same. Interestingly, though,

- 30% of MLS librarians read romance for work, as compared to 20% of non-MLS respondents
- 44% of MLS librarians "sometimes" or "often" discuss romance with colleagues, as compared to 41% of non-MLS respondents – though slightly more non-MLS than MLS holders talk to their friends or family about romance novels

We also asked some attitudinal questions, to determine where MLS and non-MLS holders fell on their acceptance of popular conceptions of romance novels. The detailed results are in the handout, but what we generally found was that

- MLS-holders were more likely to answer in a romance-favorable way than non-MLS holders, but also that
- MLS-holders were more likely than non-MLS holders not to answer at all.

In a few cases, MLS-holders were twice as likely to leave a response blank, as happened with the statement *Romance novels are pornography for women*.

[Quotes from written survey comments, overview of focus group results]

Respecting Romance: External Evidence

[OCLC stuff, romance versus other genre sales]

Conclusion

At the beginning of this project we asked, *Is there a disconnect between what is taught regarding reader advisory service and the construction of professional practice?* The answer would seem to be “yes.” There is precious little taught about reader advisory services in LIS programs at all. Librarians’ practices toward romance is largely self-taught, and seems to be subject to two influences: **intellectual knowledge versus stereotype.**

[More Linda stuff here]

For reference if you're interested....

Romances are popular, high-circulating items in my library.	MLS	Non-MLS
No answer	1%	1%
Strongly Disagree	5%	5%
Disagree	5%	19%
Agree	52%	54%
Strongly Agree	37%	21%
Romance readers are less educated.	MLS	Non-MLS
No answer	3%	2%
Strongly Disagree	37%	32%
Disagree	51%	58%
Agree	7%	7%
Strongly Agree	1%	1%
Romance readers learn behaviors and attitudes from romance novels.	MLS	Non-MLS
No answer	11%	5%
Strongly Disagree	14%	15%
Disagree	55%	56%
Agree	20%	25%
Strongly Agree	1%	0%
Romance novels portray strong female characters.	MLS	Non-MLS
No answer	15%	13%
Strongly Disagree	1%	4%
Disagree	17%	24%
Agree	60%	57%
Strongly Agree	7%	2%
Romance novels are pornography for women.	MLS	Non-MLS
No answer	8%	4%
Strongly Disagree	44%	29%
Disagree	44%	56%
Agree	5%	11%
Strongly Agree	0%	0%
Romance novels are instruction manuals on how to “catch a man.”	MLS	Non-MLS
No answer	6%	2%
Strongly Disagree	47%	34%

Disagree	45%	61%
Agree	1%	2%
Strongly Agree	0%	0%
Romance novels teach women traditional values of motherhood and wifedom.	MLS	Non-MLS
No answer	8%	3%
Strongly Disagree	21%	15%
Disagree	56%	65%
Agree	15%	15%
Strongly Agree	0%	1%