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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Shearer and Burgin have put together an impressive collection of writing in The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion. Sixteen chapters are divided into three distinct parts: education and foundations of advisors; public and school library advisory services; and further and future advisory roles. A detailed table of contents and a succinct index direct readers to specific points within the book. Introductory and conclusion statements by Shearer and Burgin are given, as well as section overviews. Simply stated, The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion is an authoritative treasury of timely writings.

What makes this collection ranked stellar? It covers every conceivable aspect of RA. Within those topics, varying points of view and spins on issues are argued. Among all of the authors, though, one common thread is sung: let’s beef up our advisory proficiency and dexterity so that we can offer improved services for our patrons. It is important to note, though, that RA is not affected only by public service librarians. Though they are the front line for helping patrons with reading recommendations, collection development librarians are responsible for adding popular (and not-so-popular) titles to libraries’ collections. Likewise, cataloging librarians are responsible for cataloging and organizing those titles effectively. RA—like all parts of librarianship—has to be a term effort.

Section one focuses on the education and foundation of advisors. Wayne Wiegand begins the compilation with a historical look at the waning of RA. First, he declares, the University of Chicago’s original doctoral program in library science ignored patrons’ fiction reading interests, claiming them to be unscientific. Second, he points a finger at our own national alliance, ALA, and contends that the 1839 Library Bill of Rights made concern in readers’ tastes an invasion of privacy. Finally, Wiegand exhibits a study done by the University of Chicago which reckoned that libraries should focus on the propagation of “useful” information, not “stories.” And then began the downward spiral of RA.

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Surveys have been done, as described in chapter two, to reveal just how many RA classes or lessons (or even contact faculty members) are available in ALA-accredited library schools across the nation. In chapter three, an example syllabus and supporting documents are offered for a graduate RA Services class. Duncan Smith highlights some of the pitfalls resulting from our lack of training and attempts to pinpoint our role as advisors. Chapters five and six investigate common characteristics of advisors and one magic catalyst that thrusts them into states of altered consciousness.

Section two offers research that forces library professionals to take a hard look at the current state of RA. When ALA brought forth the Library Bill of Rights, librarian-patron transactions became almost business-like in their user- and privacy-centered platform. In this business-like tradition, Anne May reports on a mystery-shopper-type experiment in Nassau County, New York in which graduate students posed as readers’ advisers. The results show service at a level comparable to mine that I described in the introduction to this column: embarrassing. “All too often,” May asserts, “library personnel remarked on their own reading preferences instead of listening to their clientele.”

The third section of The Readers’ Advisor Companion spotlights expanded advisory roles for librarians. With increased and more encompassing roles, we can provide improved and better-rounded service to patrons. Advisory for nonfiction and audiovisual materials are outlined in chapters twelve and thirteen, and chapters fourteen and fifteen delve into advisory for the reams of young adult and multicultural literature.

Glen Holt’s concluding chapter is exemplary of the aforementioned common song: better services to library users. Holt conceptualizes an entire zone devoted to the bookshelf, a place that has been realized in St. Louis Public Library’s Center for the Reader. In order for this concept to become a reality in other libraries, professionals need to retrain and rethink. We need to shift with the shifting reader culture. We need to partner with those who promote reading and stories.

In the opening chapter of The Readers’ Advisor Companion, Wiegand argues that the 1980s saw administrators “moving their curricula towards a definition of information that emerging technologies were largely driving.” Since the dawn of the information age, our profession has had to fight and struggle to prove its worth and justify its existence. When information is seen only as that which can be manipulated from a database, administrators—all people—miss out on the value-added component of librarians’ service. Readers’ advisory is arguably the largest piece of this human component. Public and school libraries naturally will have greater opportunities to offer RA service, but academic and special librarians cannot ignore the necessity of RA skills and knowledge. Though the reader centers that Holt advocates might not pop up next year—or even in the next ten years—it is not unthinkable that RA desks will evolve to that level. And regardless of feelings toward and/or practices of RA, dare I be so bold as to suggest that every public librarian should read May’s chapter on the mystery-shopper readers’ advise experiment. The Readers’ Advisor Companion is an important read for all of us—public service librarians and technical service librarians alike—to stay on top of our profession.


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Like Readers’ Advisor Companion, Alternative Library Literature 200-2001: A Biennial Anthology is also an important delectus for library professionals. Berman and Danky have reprinted articles and opinion pieces from newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and Web sites. The strong voices heard in these selections offer views about topics ranging from librarians in film to film censorship; from alternative presses to alternative media; and from Bill Gates to Amazon.com. Berman and Danky have divided the content into six sections: People/Work, Women, Censorship/Intellectual Freedom, Alternatives, Service/Advocacy/Empowerment, and Cyberspace/Virtual Libraries. A detailed table of contents and a thorough index embrace the content. The font face, font size, columnar formation, and text orientation of each piece varies, probably according to the setup of the original publications. Pages are dotted with illustrations and clipart as diverse and as intrusive as three flying martial artists are closely followed by Uncle Sam’s top hat.

Three articles in particular deal with reader’s advisory. Nancy Kranich, past president of ALA, discusses how library professionals can more actively promote alternative press materials in her piece “A Question of Balance: The Role of Libraries in Providing Alternatives to the Mainstream Media.” Kranich presents disturbing statistical information about book industry superstores, such as Barnes and Noble; publishing conglomerates, such as Pearson and Thomson; and the “other” publishers, including university presses. We could not survive without the major leagues like Pearson and Thomson. We also could not offer balanced collections without our minor league presses. Kranich reminds us of our obligation to provide library users materials—fiction, nonfiction, monographs, serials, and the whole shebang—free of mainstream publication bias that is based on sales, marketing, and the “typical” consumer. When we showcase and recommend titles in Oprah’s list of favorites, we also need to showcase and recommend titles in alternative press lists. More importantly, we need to educate ourselves so that we can do so.

In his article “The Other 90 Percent: What Your MLS Didn’t Teach You,” Byron Anderson echoes Kranich’s statistics, convictions, and insistence. Anderson urges us to “advocate for library collections that reflect the true diversity of society.” RA can play an invaluable, two-fold role in that advocacy. When advisors conduct reference interviews with readers, we must carefully listen to their interests, which we then must communicate to collection development librarians. Then, we must make ourselves aware of the alternative titles available in our collections so that we can recommend those titles to our patrons. When helping researchers with nonfiction titles, we must stress the quality of University Press materials.

The name Wayne Wiegand perhaps is familiar; his chapter on the historical waning of RA graces The Readers’ Advisor Companion. An expanded version of “Where Stories Aren’t Important: An Alternative Perspective on Library and Information Science Education” (coincidentally, the basis for Wiegand’s chapter in The Readers’ Advisor Companion) was first printed as “Librarians Ignore the Value of Stories” in The Chronicle of Higher Education. Its inclusion in Alternative Library Literature stresses the need to think critically about our profession, its education, and its services.

Kranich, Anderson, and Wiegand make apparent the relationship between collection development and RA. Moreover, all of the articles put forward in Alternative Library Literature emphasize the relationship among all library departments. As whispered in The Readers’ Advisor Companion, librarianship is a team effort. Publicly, technically, and pedagogically, we are a service-centered profession. We are all working to make information of all kinds available to a diverse population, and in this respect it is important to stay abreast of “the literature.” Not only must we read up on varying perspectives about our own areas of expertise, we must read about our colleagues’ territories as well. The better informed we are, the better we can inform our patrons. So grab a copy of Alternative Library Literature and start reading.


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Nancy Pearl’s Now Read This and Now Read This II take concomitantly on page 72
Book Reviews
from page 71

Genreflecting Advisory Series, Pearl’s books guide readers to mainstream titles published between 1978 and 2001. In the introduction to her first volume, Pearl states that her book provides a method of understanding by what criteria a reader judges a novel and therefore makes it easier to recommend titles that fit those criteria. The criteria-based root of both volumes makes them invaluable to any type of library that has even an infinitesimal responsibility to provide adult fiction readers’ advisory services.

New Read This and New Read This II are accessible from all major data points: author, title, subject, and “appeal characteristics.” When putting together the first volume, Pearl states that a group of professional libraries, avid readers, and library school students brainstormed those elements in books that make patrons enjoy them. These elements—setting, story, character, and language—are the main access points for Pearl’s books, and are immediately manageable by sections tabs in the outside margins. Within these major sections, books are listed alphabetically by author. Books’ publication information is followed by a two- or three-sentence plot summary. Pearl then offers other books for readers to “now try”—books that are similar in plot, characters, and general feeling.

In New Read This, Pearl’s selection standards are entirely logical for mainstream fiction. Genre fiction is excluded, though guides to young adult literature, romance, fantasy, horror, science fiction, and Christian fiction can be found in the Genreflecting Advisory Series. ALA’s Notable Books Council selections, Pulitzer Prize recipients, National Books Award winners, National Book Critics Circle Award winners, and Booker Prize victims are automatically included in the guide. Now Read This II follows the same award-winning guidelines, and additionally embraces the book winners of lesser-known literary awards, such as the Betty Trask Award, the Whitbread Award, the Orange Prize, and the IMPAC/Dublin Award. This second volume would not be complete without Oprah’s Book Club selections. Furthermore, Pearl and her associates included books that they simply enjoyed reading (there’s nothing like good old-fashioned subjectivity). It is refreshing to note that the subjectively-added titles do not fall within the bias of publicity or critical attention; one of the goals of the New Read This books is to bring in mid-list titles.

Now Read This II is filled with added features. In the tradition of Oprah’s Book Club, Pearl supplements the volume with an appendix considering how to maintain a dynamic book club. This appendix provides information about various book awards. Yet another appendix offers titles bridging genre fiction (romance, mystery, historical, fantasy, “gentle reads,” suspense, thrillers, and horror). Now Read This II notates titles appropriate for young adult readers and/or for book groups. Finally, New Read This II separately reprints the author and title index from New Read This.

To effectively illustrate the usefulness of these books, I will practice a little hypothetical guidance using both New Read This and New Read This II. A patron approaches me at the reference desk and asks, “Can you recommend a good book to read?” I ask him what kind of books he likes. “Fiction,” he replies. I inquire, “Have you thoroughly enjoyed any particular titles lately?” After considerable thought, he answers, “About a Boy,” by Nick Hornby. I then take out my copy of New Read This II. I turn to the back of the book and find the author/title index which reads: “About a Boy, 171.” I turn to page 171 and do not find even the slightest mention of About a Boy. I go back to the author/title index, see page 170, go back to page 171, go back to the index, and I last realize that I have been looking in the author/title index for New Read This instead of New Read This II. But it noted that this is the only bothersome feature in Pearl’s works, and hopefully a third volume will include a cumulative author/title index.

Next, I break my advisory plan of attack into two parts: New Read This and New Read This II. I begin with the former; I pull out my copy of New Read This and flip to page 171 where I find a main entry and two-sentence description of Hornby’s High Fidelity and ask the patron if he has read it. “I have, and I liked it,” he says. About a Boy is listed as a book to “now try,” along with Audrey Hepburn’s Neck by Alan Brown. I ask the patron what he specifically enjoyed about Hornby’s books—the setting in London, the male/female relationship struggles, or the music industry (all of which are subject headings in the main entry). “London,” he retorts. Still in Now Read This, I turn to the subject index where six other titles are listed under “London”: Celebration, Divine Concepts of Physical Beauty, A Far Cry From Kensington, A Parish of Rich Women, Ripley Bogle, and Shards of Honor. From here, I can refer to these books. If they are main entry titles, I can read their two-sentence descriptions, investigate their subject headings, and “now try” their recommended titles.

After this, I return to New Read This II and look in the correct author/title index which points me to page 102. About a Boy is a main entry. The subject headings include ALA Notable Books, British Authors, Depressions, Humorous Fiction, London, Single Men, Single Mothers, Single Women, and Teenage Boys. “Now try” recommendations consist of Hornby’s own How to Be Good and Fever Pitch, Steve Kluger’s Last Days of Summer, and Michael Dowling’s Breakfast With Scot.

After I have explored all of the subject headings along with all of the “now try” titles and authors, in both New Try This and New Try This II, I can recommend to the patron literally dozens of books to read. It is extremely important to keep in mind, though, that these volumes only allow me to recommend mainstream fiction. In order to provide patrons with balanced recommendations, alternative press lists must be consulted. Still, Pearl’s books are exceptional resources for high school, public, and academic libraries and library patrons. Two very enthusiastic thumbs up.


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

What a task for Herald and Kunzel! Constructing a manual to science fiction works must have been a daunting mission, yet their handbook, Strictly Science Fiction: A Guide to Reading Interests, is certainly an accomplishment. Strictly Science Fiction is not set up exactly like its series sisters Now Read This and New Read Read This II by Nancy Pearl, there is something more sections that make up the main access points. Accordingly, Strictly Science Fiction covers a greater wealth of material than Pearl’s volumes. Since the science fiction genre is not easily divided into subgenres, Herald and Kunzel have sought to map the field by “grouping titles with similar qualities and appeal so that readers and those who advise readers) can easily locate books that are similar to others they have enjoyed.”

Over nine hundred titles are included in Strictly Science Fiction. In determining which books to incorporate, Herald and Kunzel consulted several libraries’ holdings from across the United States (Princeton Public Library, Albuquerque Public Library, San Antonio Public Library, and the Colorado Unified Catalog System, to name a few). While most titles were published in the 1990s, publication dates range from 1818 to 2002. Classics, such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, lie next to hot-off-the-press works, such as Christopher Stasheff’s Wizard in a Feud.

Eight chapters divide the genre into broad categories and make the main access points for Strictly Science Fiction. As with Pearl’s Now Read This volumes, these chapters are immediately manageable by chapter tabs in the outside margins. Each chapter is introduced by a brief explanation of its contents. In the instance in which chapters have different subcategories, an explanatory paragraph precedes those subcategories as well. For example, chapter one covers action adventure science fiction and is divided into other subgenre themes and types: militaryistic and war writing, exploration, journeys through space and time, shared worlds, etc.). Most titles are listed alphabetically by author; however, in the case of time-sensitive titles, titles are listed in chronological order. Brief annotations (three to five sentences) accompany the publication information. Furthermore, Herald and Kunzel have designated books with icons for award-winning titles, science fiction classics, books that have been made into films, and material appropriate for young adult readers.

Aside from action adventure science fiction, other chapters encompass technology, “Our Strange World,” aliens, and genre blending. These chapters are all divided into subcategories for more specific explanations continued on page 73
and science fiction is entitled “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Sirius” (wink-wink). Another chapter is solely devoted to YA SF writing. There is also a chapter covering short story anthologies. For library professionals, the most helpful chapter might be the last—“Resources for Librarians and Readers”—which offers information about periodicals, online resources, bibliographies, biographies, indexes, encyclopedias, dictionaries, criticism, and more.

An appendix lists winning titles of the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, the Locus Poll Award, the James Tiptree Jr. Award, the Sidewise Award for Alternate History, and the Saffire Award. In addition, the appendix lists “best” authors and their “best” writing—an informal compilation of authors and their books that have received awards. The appendix is followed by an author/title index, a subject index, and a character index.

I sincerely hope that Herald and Kunzel collaborate again on a subsequent edition of Strictly Science Fiction. When they do, though, I humbly request that they include books for readers who are more avidly interested in science fiction—no fair try-as Pearl does in her Now Read This volumes. Also, even though the third chapter in the outside margins is advantageous—more detailed table of contents might be beneficial.

In their introduction, Herald and Kunzel state, “readers” advisory librarians, booksellers, collection development librarians, teachers, students, and science fiction aficionados will all hopefully find something of value in this resource.” This is, indeed, a valuable resource for all of the aforementioned individuals.

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**Group Therapy**

by Rosann Bazirjian (Assistant Dean for Technical & Access Services, University Libraries, The Pennsylvania State University, 507 Paterno Library, University Park, PA 16802-1812; Phone: 814-865-0404; Fax: 814-865-3665)

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**GRIPE:** (Submitted by Andrea Hall, Serials Assistant, Madonna University Library)

We are in the process of an Information Technology organizational plan, which would merge the library with Media Services, Academic Computer Services, Technology Learning Services, Information Systems, and Web Development. The result being all team members would rotate among the various IT areas. Our director would like to know if any library has undergone this process and how it is working now.

What are the feelings among the library staff? What about the patrons? How long did it take from start to finish? The projected time for us is 2003-2004. What about cost? Were any jobs eliminated in the library as a result?

**RESPONSE:** (Submitted by Rick Anderson, Director of Resource Acquisitions, University of Nevada, Reno)

At the University of Nevada, Reno, the libraries are an integral part of the Information Technologies division. The Vice President for Information Technology and the Dean of University Libraries are the same person, an organizational quirk that carries with it a number of significant benefits. For one thing, it means that the Dean of Libraries reports directly to the university president and consults with the president on matters of university-wide importance. For another, it means that the Dean is aware (and in a position to debate the merits) of actions by other administrators that may lead to the siphoning-off or general degradation of library and information resources. And at an institution as technology-driven as Nevada, it means that the libraries and their information dissemination needs are able to help set the agenda for essential technological support.

As Steven D. Zink, Nevada’s VP for IT and Dean of Libraries, points out, however, “this arrangement only works if the administration regards information technology as a strategic asset that is central to the institution’s mission. If viewed in this way, information technology, and, indeed, information resources in general, are more likely to be acknowledged as essential and mission-critical expenditures of increasing importance that must be funded accordingly.”

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**On the Road**

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With BEA as a backdrop, we began our “bibliophile blowout” weekend by joining the other guests in the Reading Room on the second floor for complimentary wine and cheese and fruit. Of course, the room was full of great books to read or take back to your room. Another couple was staying in the “Library” room, which they said was full of reference books and books about library science. Just the ticket for brushing up on your MLS. The Hotel’s proximity to the New York Public Library was the reason for the Hotel’s library theme and it is a great companion to the stately and erudite NYPL. 41st Street sheets), perhaps while Mom and Dad stay in the Erotic Literature room.

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