

Reader [R]evolution

Recognizing Our True Purpose



Melissa Elliott / meligelliott@gmail.com

Melissa teaches young adult literature and readers' advisory services as an adjunct professor for the MLIS program at University of California, Los Angeles. She is also a library consultant through her business, The Book Adept (<http://bookadept.com>).

 She is currently reading *Once Upon a River* by Diane Setterfield.

Librarians used to be the gatekeepers to knowledge. Forty years ago, if you were in need of information for a school paper or a corporate report, you would go to the reference desk and the librarian would help you find it.

Then came the internet. And speaking from the newly found ability to word-search anything they wanted to know, people in authority made pronouncements about library culture and resources about which they had little understanding: Libraries are no longer necessary—we have Google! Never mind that the

level of information from Google washes up on a shallow shore; people who didn't understand how information retrieval worked seemed perfectly happy with their results. It was like when everyone bought a Macintosh, and corporate newsletters went from being works of art produced by designers to hideous amateur tabloids with bad hyphenation.

The response of librarians was to seek desperately for relevance. Talk ensued about the library as a community space, a meeting place, a source of free resources. Libraries focused on programming to entice patrons. Libraries

picked up the slack from the schools by addressing new initiatives such as STEM, and installing makerspaces and 3D printers. Never mind that librarians weren't trained to provide those services; they would simply have to reinvent themselves to meet the challenge. It provoked a lot of anxiety and second-guessing.

Service at the reference desk now consists of helping people with Microsoft Word or assisting them in downloading a photograph or a résumé. Librarians hand out headphones and act as police officers to ensure everyone has their turn at the express computer.

Meanwhile, what is happening at the library school? Despite these cataclysmic shifts in career relevance, library schools continue to require that every student take a reference class. There are courses offered in such up-and-coming areas as data and asset management, community engagement, and digital literacy, but one of the core skills that public librarians are expected to use daily isn't being taught.

When I decided to get my master's degree and become a librarian, my focus was reading. I had always been an eclectic and voracious reader, and I believed this would give me a symbiosis with library patrons. One of my first classes was young adult services, and the assigned reading, *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts: The Library and the Young Adult*, by Margaret Edwards and published in 1969, immediately resonated. Edwards documented how she created a profession (teen librarian) based on the idea that reading is paramount, and she trained her assistants accordingly. Teen librarians were not allowed to work "on the floor" until they had read 200 books and book-talked them to Edwards so she knew they had done their homework.¹ The big difference between Edwards and other librarians of her day was that she was not focused on making teens read in order to better themselves; rather, she knew that if they found books that sparked their interest, there would be no need to force them.

Edwards became my hero, and I based my subsequent decade of teen librarianship on her principles. With the help of a like-minded colleague, we built up the teen book clubs from two to three (with 20+ teens in each); and every program that we designed and produced for the library was reading-oriented, from readers' theater to Book Café, with spectacular results. Most young adult librarians are surprised and grateful if a dozen teenagers show up for their programs; we regularly attracted between 45 and 65 teens to our Book Café sessions, had waiting lists for our book clubs, and teens clamored to be a part of our readers' theater productions.

While I was doing all of that, I was also working at the reference desk a few hours each day, and finding it a thankless task. The only ray of light was when a patron would ask for help finding a book to

read for pleasure. My mostly self-taught readers' advisory skills would kick in, and I would happily spend as much time as I could talking to that person about what they liked to read and finding them something that would please them. I began to see that the reason we didn't get more requests for help in that area is that our own customers didn't know that finding them a good book was one of our jobs.

I started talking to, and listening to, other librarians, and discovered that although they enjoyed helping patrons find books, they didn't feel truly competent at it. The mystery readers could help someone find a mystery but were helpless in the face of a request for literary fiction, romance, or fantasy. I went further and asked what kind of training they had had in library school to do readers' advisory, and the majority of them said that a class wasn't offered, was offered infrequently, or wasn't emphasized as important to take, so they hadn't.

If you talk to both library administrators and librarians, you will find that they have a vague belief that readers' advisory is a prerequisite skill; but if library schools aren't providing it, and librarians aren't working at it on their own, and the skill isn't emphasized as an important part of the daily job or given time and space to develop, then how exactly is a reading culture to occur in the library?

If you talk to library patrons, you will also discover that most patrons have developed their own self-selection skills, whether it's best-seller lists, award-winners, reading what their friends recommend, or simply browsing the shelves for something likely; but when none of those skills pan out, it still doesn't occur to them to walk up to the reference desk and ask a librarian. Why is that? That is the question that started haunting me.

My conclusion is that, amidst all the desperate grasping at relevancy, the entire profession has lost its way. In the rush to maintain status, readers' advisory was overlooked. Many libraries and librarians, if they think about readers' advisory, assume that it's an incidental perk to library service, an insignificant stepchild. But here is an important statistic: According to a 2017 Pew Research survey, between 64–73% of library users say they go to the library to

check out a book.² Here's another: In a NoveList secret shopper survey, 75 percent of patrons answered "no" when asked if a librarian had offered to help them find a good book.³

My next step was to start questioning and encouraging librarians to think about readers' advisory. What I discovered was that most felt guilty that they weren't better at it, but didn't have the time to remedy that on their own.

A RADICAL PROPOSAL

I'm going to propose what some may see as a radical departure from current library culture, while others may scoff at it as old-fashioned: The most important part of your library is your readers, both on your staff and in your patron base. The symbiotic relationship between the building that provides storage for a host of knowledge and entertainment and the librarians in charge of that building has been lost. Our purpose isn't to keep the physical plant running; it's to make use of the wonderful, eclectic, amazing array of stories contained within it by sharing them with our users. In order to do that, we have to have training, whether we cultivate it in ourselves or get it from a variety of sources. Then, we have to reach out to our patrons and let them know that rather than continuing to have a haphazard experience, they can be assisted by library staff to consistently satisfy their reading desires.

In order for these things to happen, though, we have to let go of some ideas, practices, and routines, and cultivate new ones. We have to believe library relevance is still tied to books. We may also have to look past some old service models and some new fads in the interest of time management. I am not advocating that all innovations must go in order to create a reading culture; but I am saying that you can't do it in a few scant minutes stolen from your "regular" routine—you have to commit to it.

Let's look at the advantages of a reading culture: If 68 percent (an average based on the previously cited 2017 Pew study) of your patrons are coming to the library to find a book to read, what might be that majority's response if they suddenly found that process easier and more pleasant? What if, when they

walked through the doors, they were confronted by beautiful up-to-date displays of books, with staff recommendation cards attached? What if, instead of having to brave the reference desk, they now queued at a readers' advisory station, where a librarian with an OPAC and some finding aids and custom-created booklists was ready to help them find the book they wanted and assist them to expand their horizons with read-alikes? What would happen when they found out that librarians would actually take the time—not three minutes but thirty—to discuss their preferences, enter thoroughly into their enthusiasms, and listen in turn to *their* recommendations?

What if, in this reading culture, there were book clubs for people who wanted that social experience? What if the programming at this library was primarily focused on reading, so that marvelous authors could come and talk about their books? What if the library held Book Cafés that brought people together to book-talk what they're reading to one another while enjoying a cappuccino, or gathered a group of aspiring actors to produce a readers' theater version of a popular or classic novel to entertain and engage those whose reading skills might be poor but whose appreciation of story is rich?

What if, at this library, social media was focused on the collection? What if the blog writers directed readers to the library catalog at the end of each review, so the book could be put on hold that instant? What if the Facebook page publicized all the library's events with added details about what readers could expect from them? What if Instagram or Pinterest provided readers with custom-themed lists so that they didn't have to rely on bestsellers but could focus on *their* library's collection and have instant gratification when it came time to check one out? What if librarians on Twitter shared a book of the week, or a great quote about reading? What if outreach librarians spent their time book-talking to every demographic, from children to seniors, and thus carried this reading culture out into the community?

What do you think would happen at this library? My belief is that the 68 percent who come for a book would keep coming, would derive immense satisfaction from the experience, would tell others,

would positively gush about their library, and the transformation that began with the library would be completed by the readers.

It's a powerful vision, isn't it? But apart from the personal satisfaction it would give me, as a librarian, and maybe you as well, to know that my primary mandate was to find the right book for everyone who came in, let's think about the political and financial aspects of this "plan." First of all, let's return once again to that 68 percent of patrons looking for a book, and imagine that they have reacted as I predicted: Do you think, when it comes time to vote for more funding for the library, that your citizens will be more likely to say yes if their reading habits have been treated as the most important priority of the library? Do you think that a citizenry that has become involved through programs, book clubs, and a regular habit of visitation will be more or less likely to see the library as a necessity? Will they realize that although they can take a coding class or learn to draw at a variety of venues, the only place where their reading needs are met, and met for free, is the library?

Now let's look at our own part in this transformation: Do we need to write a grant to make it happen? Do we need to buy anything other than what we're already buying? Do we need to hire extra or different people to make it work? The truth is that nothing but a change of mind, a shift in emphasis, is needed to create this atmosphere. Although training will be necessary for some staff, the real transformation is the simple encouragement of everyone who works there to think of the library as a source of reading and to act accordingly. And for those who bristled when I mentioned coding and art classes in a context that might indicate dropping them from

the curriculum, I'm not proposing exclusivity to that degree. What I am proposing, however, is that every class or workshop can have a focus that causes circulation to rise. At your art classes, provide a display of books that will further your participants' knowledge of what they have learned in the class. Not all your participants will avail themselves, but if you check out five more books, that's five more towards your total statistics. And along with citizens' approbation, circulation statistics are among the most prized measure of whether you are doing your job. We all know that circulation has generally declined in recent years, and we tend to blame it on various things; but if we have not been doing our best to feature our collection and let our community see our commitment to them as readers, then we know there is another reason—it's on us.

I'll leave you with the reiteration that no matter what else it is or does, a library is a giant box filled with books. A library's patrons, 64–73% of them, are just looking for a good one. You are at the cusp of where those two facts meet. What are you going to do? 

REFERENCES

1. Margaret A. Edwards, *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts: The Library and the Young Adult* (NY: Hawthorn Books, 1969), 54.
2. John B. Horrigan, "Library usage and engagement," Pew Research Center, September 9, 2016, www.pewinternet.org/2016/09/09/library-usage-and-engagement.
3. Duncan Smith, NoveList, workshop speech, Ontario, Canada (November 2016).

PLA COVID-19 Resources

The PLA Board of Directors and staff are committed to providing information on the rapidly evolving situation with COVID-19 to PLA members. We have compiled some information at www.ala.org/pla/issues/covid-19 to consider as your library, community, and family respond to the crisis. If you have information you think would be helpful to add, please email pla@ala.org. 