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Readers’ Advisory Services Assignment

A Reader’s Advisory (RA) service involves librarians providing support to patrons with their leisure reading (Dali, 2013, p. 474). How the librarians should support patrons and what skills the librarians need to give effective support is more controversial. I wonder if librarians disagree in part because they have contrasting views on how people respond to fiction?

Librarians share a broad consensus on what a Reader’s Advisory (RA) service is (Sarricks & Trott, 2008), but they disagree on what one should aim to accomplish and how it should operate (Smith, 2015; Crowley, 2015). Beolens argues that patrons make sense of books based on their own internal beliefs. Beolens asserts that “there is no such thing as an intrinsically ‘good’ book . . . reading is a personal process of interaction between reader and text” (Beolens, 2016, p. 81). If what makes a good book is dictated by what the reader brings to the book, then it follows that it is difficult for the librarian to anticipate what book will work for any particular patron. To support the patron, the librarian has to discover what is inside the patron, and then set a selection of books in front of the patron and hope that one works. However, it can also be argued that there are intrinsically ‘good’ books and ‘good’ writers. For example, the Nobel prize for literature, the Man Booker prize, and other such awards exist to recognize the accomplishments of distinguished writers. Do libraries, through how they offer users recommendations in virtual spaces, demonstrate a view on the question of what makes a good book?

At the Saint Louis Public Library (https://www.slpl.org), the librarians use a variety of approaches to promoting and recommending materials services through their virtual spaces. The landing page of the library’s website contains scrolling lists of recommended titles, prepared by staff members. Some of the lists are topical, as they reflect on current events, but others are targeted at important groups of library users, such as the black community. There are further lists within the ‘browse’ section of the website, including lists of award winning books (<https://slpl.bibliocommons.com/explore/awards>). For children and teens, the library offers a separate set of lists that are specific to particular age groups (<https://www.slpl.org/kidsteens/>). Users who want reviews can find evaluations of titles from critics as well as other users on item record (for example, see: <https://slpl.bibliocommons.com/item/show/1419205116_brother>). Moreover, the library offers a remote readers advisory service that prompts users to fill out a form with information about their preferences, so that librarians can respond with personalized recommendations (https://www.slpl.org/next-favorite/). The Saint Louis Public Library has made a large investment in developing its virtual spaces and an important part of their role is to recommend materials. What I like about the recommendation services is that it is so well integrated into the library’s website. The website offers users the ability to explore materials in a wide variety of ways and is constantly directing users to recommendation tools. It is a minor quibble, but I would like to have better access to recommendation tools such as NoveList, from within the library website.

By contrast, the Ceredigion Public Library system, which includes the town of Aberystwyth, makes a minimal attempt to offer a recommendation through its virtual space (<https://libraries.ceredigion.gov.uk/iguana/www.main.cls?surl=CLHome>). The only recommendation feature of the website is a scrolling bar of about thirty titles that the website suggests other users are “looking at ….. ” The feature seems to have the same content on both the English and Welsh versions of the library’s website. Perhaps this feature might offer some inspiration to users, but the materials are in both English and Welsh and on a variety of topics even though most of the English speakers cannot read Welsh. Ceredigion is one of the economically most deprived areas in Europe, so perhaps the resources it has for developing its virtual offerings are limited. Nonetheless, I could see Ceredigion borrowing some of the techniques used on the Saint Louis site, including the staff prepared lists of recommended titles. In particular, I would like to see more developed recommendation lists in Welsh.

The Saint Louis and Ceredigion libraries both offer recommendations in their virtual spaces. The level of investment is contrasting, but do they share a similar understanding of the role of a recommendation service? I would argue that they do not. Saint Louis has the resources to offer many different types of recommendations. The Saint Louis library offers users many lists, in the hope that one contains an item that suits the user, but the library can also provide recommendations backed by critics and other authoritative people, such as their own librarians. By contrast, the Ceredigion library makes no attempt to distinguish good books, but simply offers users a haphazard array of books, that seems to have been selected based on the interests of other library users. Only well-resourced libraries, it seems can afford to take the position that there are intrinsically ‘good’ books and ‘good’ writers, at least in terms of how they implement a recommendation service in their virtual space

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