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LS507

Reference encounter: The user’s perspective

**In-person encounter**

* I went to the Kathryn Linnemann Branch of the St. Charles City-County Library. I work at a different branch in this library district; however, I made sure I did not know the librarian who helped me with my reference question.
* My reference question was: “I’m looking for something new to read. I’ve been wanting to read something by Stephen King for a while, but he has so many books I’m not sure where to start. Could you help me find a good starting point?” My question, while not coming out exactly this well-worded in person, remained essentially the same.
* I genuinely wanted some help with diving into the Stephen King universe. This is a question I’ve been wanting an answer to ever since I got into some of the movie adaptations of his books, but the vast number of options intimidated me. In asking this question, I wanted to be given a few different book choices to find a good entry point into King’s repertoire.
* The librarian who helped me conducted a reference interview that provided an answer to my question, but it was not extensive. After I asked my question, she restated it to be sure she understood my meaning. She told me she had never read King, so she pulled up his bio on NoveList and printed it out for me. She suggested I try the Dark Tower series because she knew a lot of other patrons were fans, and printed a list of read-alikes for the series. She figured out the first book in the series was *The Gunslinger* and then looked for it in the catalog to see if it was in at the library. After seeing that it was in, she asked if I needed help finding it. I declined, thanked her and went to find the book.
* I think the most helpful aspects of the interview were when she restated my question and when she asked if I would like her to print out King’s bio for me. When she restated my question, I felt more confident she understood what I wanted, and I ended up using the printout to choose a book. However, I think the fact that she had never read any King herself made her anxious to find an answer for me, and I wish she would have asked me one or two questions about my taste in books. The *Dark Tower* series was too intense a reading commitment for me to start out on, and I ended up leaving with *Different Seasons*, one of his short story collections.
* I think this was an successful reference encounter because I did end up leaving with a book by King that I chose with the help of one of the guides the librarian provided. The printout actually included an answer to my question, suggesting *The Shining*, *The Stand* and *Full Dark, No Stars* as good starting-off points. I liked the idea of a short story collection, but *Full Dark, No Stars* sounded too dark for my mood at the time, which led me to pick up *Different Seasons*. I also appreciated the librarian’s friendly and welcoming attitude, which made me feel like I would be comfortable going to her for help again.
* In comparing my interaction with RUSA guidelines, I would score the librarian I talked to high on visibility/approachability, interest and searching. The librarian was easy to find, had a friendly but professional manner and made good eye contact. She also explained her search strategy clearly and followed through when helping me find a book by checking that it was available at the library. However, I think the fact that she hadn’t read King before made her feel pressure to find an answer for me, and I think my search would have benefitted from her asking me a couple more questions about what my preferences were. She also did not ask if I had any other questions or to come back if I needed more help. Therefore, I would score her less high on listening/inquiring and follow-up.

**Remote reference encounter**

* I called the information desk at the Middendorf-Kredell Library, which is another library in the St. Charles City-County Library District. Again, I made sure I did not know the librarian I was speaking to before asking my question.
* I asked the same question over the phone as I did in person.
* I was hoping to receive the same information as I was from my in-person encounter; however, I was also hoping to receive some more personal advice this time around.
* The librarian I spoke to on the phone did not perform much of an interview, but instead launched into a myriad of suggestions of where to start reading King. She told me she had read a lot of King and that his older work was better. She listed off a lot of titles including *Carrie*, *Cujo* and *Salem’s Lot*. She also suggested the Bill Hodges series, which she said was one of his better recent works, and his son Joe Hill’s *Heart-Shaped Box*. During the interaction I don’t think she asked me one question, but she was clearly enthusiastic about my own question.
* Although there was no interview, I did enjoy the librarian’s enthusiasm about answering my question. It was apparent she enjoyed reading King and was excited to pass on advice about his work to a fellow reader. I also liked that she gave a strong opinion about which works were better than others. Some might find this off-putting, but I appreciated that she was giving me her honest opinion about King. However, I again wished that she would have asked me some questions about my personal preferences. She ended up giving me so many suggestions that I still would need to take considerable time on my own to decide where to start. Some questions about preferences on genre, page length and even opinions on film adaptations of his work would have led me in a more precise direction.
* Again, I would say the interaction was successful overall. I’ve come to find that the personal actions of the librarians matter more to me than the quality of advice given. The librarian I spoke with over the phone seemed genuinely excited to help me and ended the phone call by saying she was looking forward to seeing me at the branch. These aspects of the interaction left a much stronger impression on me than the advice she gave. I feel confident that if I came in to the library she would be happy to talk more about King and give even more suggestions on what to read next.
* I would give this librarian a high score on approachability and interest, a middling score on searching and follow-up, and a lower score on listening/inquiring. As I said, she took my question and ran with it, asking me no questions and giving me little entry to provide my own input. This is also why I would give her a middling score on follow up: she told me she looked forward to seeing me but didn’t ask if I needed any additional advice. I would choose a middling score on searching because although I could tell she was using her own resources and knowledge effectively, she did not instruct me on how to apply any search strategies on my own. However, I would score this librarian high on approachability and interest because she was friendly and enthusiastic and made me feel like she was happy to help me.

After speaking with these two librarians, the thing I would most like to emulate in my own work is making the patron feel like I am happy to help them. I chose my question not only because I really wanted some help, but also because I was curious to see how librarians would react to a reader’s advisory question. I know that I would love to answer advisory questions when someone is asking about an author or genre I enjoy, but I’m not sure how I would handle a question where I was unfamiliar with the author or genre. I ended up observing both situations, and although I feel more confident in the King-reading librarian’s suggestions, I think the non-King-reader was equally friendly and willing to help. I would, however, try more to ensure that I had answered my patron’s question by asking them more questions instead of mostly answering. I think it would be easy for me to default into answer-finding mode because that is one of the biggest functions of a reference job, but my experiences demonstrate that it’s important to delve deeper into a patron’s request to find a truly satisfactory answer.

Although I used a phone reference service rather than an online one, I do believe some questions would be better suited to an online environment. For example, some subjects such as coding and gaming have origins in the Internet and have a variety of solid resources to refer a patron to for further study. Additionally, subjects with a strong audiovisual element such as film studies and music history would benefit from Internet resources that make film and music clips easily accessible. However, librarians would have to naturally be more cautious when using the Internet as a resource and make sure their patrons (and they) know which sites are trustworthy and which are not. It is much easier to tell if printed material is reliable or not simply because there are barriers to being published that many websites will never have to face. This leads me to the conclusion that those topics such as coding that have many known, reliable sources online would be better suited to the online environment.