
Good for What?

Non-appeal, Discussability, and Book Groups (Part 1)

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Guest Columnist

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Since the publication of *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* (Joyce Saricks. ALA Editions: 1989, 1997, 2005) readers' advisors have used the concept of appeal as a way to connect readers with books. Looking at the elements of a piece of writing—character, language, mood, setting, and story, and what the reader prefers in each area—helps the readers' advisor to make connections between works that the reader may not have considered, and thus expands the possible choices for that reader. What has been less explored, though, is the concept of working with those elements of a book that the reader did not enjoy. In her two-part column, Joan Bessman Taylor explores the role of these non-appealing elements in the practice of readers' advisory. In part one, Taylor looks at how readers' advisors can best work with discussing books that do not appeal to them personally but that a reader enjoys. She suggests that understanding non-appeal can expand the possibilities for making thoughtful suggestions. In part two (*RUSQ* 47-1), Taylor applies the concept of non-appeal to working with reading groups in selecting titles that will generate lively and thoughtful discussion.

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Pacing, characterization, storyline, frame—those who work in reader services know well the aspects of appeal described by Joyce Saricks in *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*.¹ We may also, as almost second nature, consider the mood of the patron, the reading experience sought, and the patron's tolerance for the cost in time and money finding and reading a certain book will require as is suggested through Catherine Ross's research on how readers select pleasure reading.² But how often do we consider what one regular contributor to the Fiction_L electronic discussion list referred to as the "dark underbelly" of readers' advisory (RA) service—what people dislike about some books?³ We operate in terms of appeal factors, focusing on what a book has or does, but what about what a book does not have, does not include, or includes when it could have been omitted without anyone missing it? What about "non-appeal" factors? (I am intentionally avoiding calling these negative appeal factors for two reasons. I do

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not want to cast the fact that people dislike certain qualities of books as a negative attribute, and because the term “negative appeal” is used very explicitly in the marketing field to refer to attempts to increase people’s anxiety about not using a service by stressing the loss they will experience if they do not purchase that service. Understand also that many people include these aspects when they refer to appeal factors, though they rarely do so explicitly.) There may be just as much to draw from the reasons people dislike a book (whether they are library patrons or the librarian striving to serve them) as there is from why the same book is revered by someone else. Being a reading advocate does not mean that one must love every book ever written or feign love when a book is not of one’s preference. Professionals are people with feelings and opinions, not unlike those of the communities we serve. So how do you talk about a book you dislike when trying to recommend it to someone else who might like it? It was precisely this question that was posed, though only partially addressed, on Fiction_L last March. Of course, questions are rarely initiated in such a straight-forward and clear-cut manner. Like all things, they emerge in a context.

What erupted into a passionate and lengthy discussion by librarians of “books you didn’t like” (and in some cases hated) and a debate about the extent to which one should feel comfortable on a professional electronic discussion list venting feelings that some might view as in conflict with our mission, began innocently enough. The active two-day discussion began when a director of a public library system posted a query prompted by his monthly book group in the hope of compiling a list of titles to suggest to that group for future reading. After observing that they were disagreeing about a book that everyone else outside their group seemed to love, the book group decided it might be interesting to select for their future reading other works that might elicit the same reaction. The question posed to the list on their behalf was, “What book did *you* not like, that the rest of the reading world was praising to the skies?”⁴ It is useful to note several aspects of this situation. First, the book group wanted suggestions for titles of books that they might dislike in order to read works that would spark disagreement either between members of the group itself or between the group and the rest of the reading world, thereby providing instant fuel for conversation. So in this instance, they were patrons wanting book recommendations but not necessarily for unanimously likeable books. Second, the director was not (it seems) trying to inflame “the collective brain” of the discussion list but rather use it as the resource many of us have come to rely on for answering those tricky questions that our inquisitive and creative (though sometimes clueless—i.e., they offer us few clues for our hunt) patrons present to us. As someone who conducts research on reader interests and practices, I found the electronic exchange to have imbedded within it several gems that I would like to extract from the mire before they are lost.

Whether librarians like a book does not have to influence how they suggest it to others, though it can—and in some positive ways—if an appropriate approach is taken. And one

does not have to assume that readers are always looking for books they will “like.” When approached for a “good” book it would befit us to ask, “Good for what?” or “In what way?” I do not say this flippantly at all. In my six years of conducting qualitative research with book groups it has come to my attention time and time again that the “best” books, books we are trained as professionals to identify and review, are not necessarily the best books for promoting discussion. Given that book group members are a growing constituent of the populations we serve, their book selection criteria must be taken into account when we are providing service to them. To set the foundation for this, I will first discuss ways of talking about books that we may not personally care for but that may be just what our patrons are seeking. Then I will turn to a discussion of the creative role of “non-appeal” factors in the practices of book groups.

AVOIDING INSINCERITY

In their reflections on the “Books you didn’t like” thread, participants of Fiction_L made clear that their own lack of enthusiasm for certain works does not necessarily hinder their ability to recommend those works to others. Though some participants sought suggestions for how to do better RA with works they have not read or may not care to read, others emphasized that one’s personal feelings do not necessarily influence how we conduct our professional lives. From the discussion, I identified several ways one could approach recommending books one did not like without having to pretend to like them, thus avoiding insulting both our own aesthetics and the intelligence of our patrons.

The first approach could be described as being “disinterested.” Rather than thinking about books in terms of whether or not we liked or enjoyed them, the concentration instead would be placed on the aspects that contributed to such feelings. This takes us back to aspects of pacing, characterization, storyline, frame, mood, and so on. If we did not like a book because it included pages and pages of description, this speaks to pacing and mood. Some readers, for instance, love a book that enables them to picture a place through the depth of the author’s description. Here we make a distinction between what patrons want and what we think they should want based on our own preferences. The former drives us while the latter derails our mission.

If we have not actually read a work because it fits into a category of books we just cannot bring ourselves to crack, there are many tools created by others who likely have read it. As Mary K. Chelton continuously recommends in her workshops for readers’ advisors, use tools such as NovelList to assist you in finding read-alikes.⁵ By doing so, you widen your knowledge about authors and books, which will help in your job beyond the immediate query. It is also no secret that reading reviews in professional reviewing sources and in city newspapers can assist one in making suggestions.

Another approach is to call on other resident experts to join the conversation. If you have colleagues who read tons

of science fiction when you can't stand it, get their insights. The patron wants help. No one said you can't have help also. It will still be clear that the suggestions are coming from professionals, and patrons will appreciate that you took their requests seriously enough to seek help rather than attempting to make something up or provide a less informed suggestion.

Provide your opinion only when asked, and when doing so, qualify it. If you express your opinion while acknowledging that it is not necessarily shared by everyone, patrons will be less likely to dismiss your recommendation because they will see that you know your stuff but just happen to have tastes that differ from their own. As one contributor to Fiction_L put it, "If they ask me what I think of a cozy mystery I tell them I am more of a *Homicide: Life on the Streets* girl, and not a *Murder She Wrote* girl."⁶ By positioning her opinion as just one option within the many possibilities that exist, the conversation is not instantly silenced. The librarian appears as one who could talk equally freely about either end of the mystery spectrum whether personally preferred by her or not. She is aware of the variety that exists within a given genre and is open to differences in opinion. It is a good thing for patrons to feel like they can admit that they did not enjoy a particular selection, and to draw distinctions between those characteristics they enjoy and those they don't. Modeling such conversations for readers will make our own jobs as readers' advisors easier.

A reasonable approach, and one that takes into consideration the enjoyment many people derive from talking about what they have read, is to invite patrons to give you their opinions of a work after reading it. You can frame this in such a way as to indicate that you would really appreciate having someone explain the book's appeal to you because you just didn't get it, as offering them a challenge or task, or as an invitation for an outright debate. Many readers like to feel like they are performing a service or function beyond "just" reading for enjoyment and you may provide them with the impetus they seek.

ASPECTS OF "NON-APPEAL" AND PICKING "GOOD" BOOKS FOR BOOK GROUPS

In the aforementioned Fiction_L discussion about "Books you didn't like," a discussion that culminated in a "Books I loved" thread, the same books and authors that were mentioned as part of the first thread also showed up in the latter thread with its opposite bent. If we as librarians are not agreed as to what books are good, why should our patrons be? Sometimes it is precisely this difference in opinion that is sought, particularly in book discussion groups. It is often remarked that the best book group discussions result from conversations about books that were liked by some members and disliked by others.

Regardless of their particular processes for doing so, book groups are all concerned with picking "good" books. The

growing number of handbooks and guides offering assistance in making these choices attests to the challenge presented to readers in making such choices. How groups define "good" has varying parameters, boundaries that Elizabeth Long describes as implying "a hierarchy of taste."⁷ In her study of women's reading groups, Long found that "mainstream" groups (i.e., middle class, white, women's groups) "rarely even consider genre books to be part of the relevant literary universe." She qualifies what she means by mainstream with her statement: "From the inception of my research, there have been genre reading groups dedicated to both mysteries and science fiction, although more mainstream groups still do not discuss them. These genre groups are mixed-gender, so I only refer to them tangentially in the course of this discussion." When Patricia Gregory interviewed ten women's book clubs in St. Louis and asked them if there were any types of books their clubs would not read she found that, "At the top of the list of forbidden books were romance, mysteries, and science fiction bestsellers."⁸ Even libraries seek to define what makes books worthy of being chosen for discussion. The section, "Choosing Good Books for Discussion," of the Seattle Public Library's online guide for starting a book club states:

Good books for discussion have multidimensional characters who are forced to make difficult choices, often under difficult situations. They present the author's view of an important truth and sometimes send a message to the reader. Books that are heavily plot driven, where the author spells out everything for the reader, leave little to discuss. Most mysteries, Westerns, romances, and science fiction/fantasy fall in this category.⁹

But such clear-cut distinctions—that is, these traditional categories of classification and evaluation, especially those made along genre lines—are not necessarily held by all book club members. As my six-year study of six groups indicates, there are successful, long-lasting groups who elect to read these "forbidden" materials, even all-women groups like the Mystery Group in my study or the mostly male comprised Science Fiction Group.¹⁰

Whether groups include genre fiction within the realm of books they will consider selecting and whatever they may view as good generally, it is agreed that the best books are not always the best books for discussion. The distinction that does seem to hold across the groups represented in previous research and in my own is that a good book in general and a good book for a book group's focus are not necessarily the same thing. The prevailing idea is that some books are better suited for fostering discussion than others. At the center of selecting books for book group attention is this notion of "discussability."

Editor's note: Part two of this article will examine the concept of the discussability of books in terms of their use by book discussion groups. Taylor will define discussability, explore the role of non-appeal in successful book discussions, and look at the

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way book group participants approach the books that they are discussing.

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