
A History of Innovation and a Future of Possibility

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Close to fifteen years ago some very bright people in RUSA decided to create a space where the most significant reference research of the year could be shared with RUSA members and other ALA Annual Conference attendees. The Reference Research Forum, sponsored by the RSS Research and Statistics committee, highlights three research projects and informs the community of cutting edge and vital considerations in the field.

Over the past fourteen-plus years, the forum has stood as an example of the best of RUSA. It was innovative and allowed to happen—we are really good at trying new ideas. It was focused on front-line staff—we are all about the work that happens at the desk with the user. And it was collaborative—we are big on bringing people together.

We have a long history of doing good, and our past inspires our future. Long before the Reference Research Forum was conceived, RUSA established such venerated institutions as the Dartmouth Medal, the Notable Books List, and the Isadore Gilbert Mudge Award. All three groups select the best of our profession—the best reference book of the year; the most notable fiction, nonfiction, and poetry for adults; and the librarian who has best embodied our ideals. If RUSA's achievements stopped at the creation of the Reference Research Forum, Notable Books, Dartmouth, and Mudge committees, we would have much to be proud of in our history. But RUSA has done a great deal more and is solidly focused on a future full of possibility.

RUSA's guiding principle is its focus on the user, and much of our work is designed to help librarians working on the front desk or managing a department. We have national guidelines that inform professional practice, help us set benchmarks and local policy, and develop internal training and standards. Just recently, RUSA revised its definition of reference—a definition long recognized as a core document of the profession—and our guidelines on virtual reference (VR) have been used as part of the foundations of a new book on offering VR in your library. *Virtual Reference Best Practices: Tailoring Services to Your Library* by M. Kathleen Kern (ALA Editions, 2008) illustrates how RUSA's guidelines can be used to shape local policy and guide implementation. If you have never spent time looking through the guidelines RUSA offers, take some time to do so. You will find the best thinking of our profession, sharply honed to help address any number of issues.

Looking toward the future, RUSA has many projects underway that will help us figure out what is next. MARS, the Machine-Assisted Reference Section of RUSA, debuted the MARS Virtual Poster Session, a project run by the MARS

Management of Electronic Resources and Services Committee, at ALA Annual Conference 2008. The sessions all focused on using evaluation data to change and improve virtual reference. In future years the poster sessions will examine other hot topics in the field.

Hot off the presses, as it were, RUSA founded a juried book list that selects the best single book in eight different genres. The Reading List marks the first time ALA has focused its collective experience and attention on genre literature. The list is designed to help readers' advisory (RA) and collection development librarians working with patrons and building collections. With one list published and the second to be announced at ALA Midwinter Meeting 2009, The Reading List is already regarded as a new standard in RA circles.

Another RA innovation that focuses on the future of our profession is the Readers' Advisory Research and Trends Forum. The forum will focus attention on current RA needs, interests, concerns, directions, and possibilities, and address these issues in a collaborative conversation. The goal of the forum is to express the cutting-edge voice of RA; to be a place where ideas, best practices, and creative possibilities are actively engaged and deconstructed; to contribute to the advancement of RA service; to serve our patrons better; and to build and support the RA community.

Just recently formalized, RUSA, with the generous support of Harper Perennial, has started a new travel grant in honor of Zora Neale Hurston. Librarians working in any number of ways to raise awareness of and promote African American literature can apply for the grant, which not only

includes funds to travel to ALA Annual Conference but tickets to the Literary Tastes Breakfast, the FOLUSA Tea, and copies of all the Zora Neale Hurston books published by Harper Perennial at the time of the award.

There is a lot more to discover about RUSA and an open invitation to everyone to get involved. I don't suppose the creators of Notable Books or the Mudge award ever thought that their ideas would become enduring legacies of the profession, but they have.

It is my hope, fifteen years from now, that RUSA will celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Reference Research Forum and the seventy-ninth, sixty-fifth, and forty-ninth anniversaries, respectively, of the Notable Books Council, the Isadore Gilbert Mudge Award, and the Dartmouth Medal. Those celebrations will be augmented by the fifteenth anniversaries of the MARS Virtual Poster Sessions (by then transformed through the very innovation they celebrate today), the Reading List, the Readers' Advisory Research and Trends Forum, and the Zora Neale Hurston award, and I am certain that all of them will have contributed to the profession in ways we can only begin to imagine today.

I also hope, whether you are one year from retirement or just starting library school, that you will actively join in the creation of the future of RUSA and contribute to its enduring legacy by adding your voice and talents to our history. RUSA is an open door to innovation, discovery, and possibility—and we are just waiting for your next great idea to move us forward.