

All Readers Their Books: Providing Access to Popular Fiction

by Duncan Smith

Reading: A Portrait

Robert Coles opens his book, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, with a sentence that describes a significant image from his childhood: "This book began in hearing my mother and father read to each other from novels by George Eliot and Dickens and Hardy and Tolstoy during my elementary school years."¹ These words provide us with a very romantic image of reading. Coles's childhood memory, however, presents a very complex process. A close examination of his description reveals two people who are intimately involved in each other's lives. These two are not only interacting with texts, but they are also sharing their involvement with each other. One can imagine the setting in which this exchange takes place. One can see a comfortably furnished, early twentieth-century living room and imagine these two people settling into a leisurely evening of sharing their love of the world's great books. Coles's description of reading is an important one. It is the description of reading with which the profession is most comfortable. It is also a description of reading that belongs increasingly to the past.

Support for this last statement can be found in Paul Gray's review of Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx*. *The Quincunx* is a 778-page novel that received considerable critical acclaim when it was published by Ballantine Books in 1990. A major reason for this attention was that the book imitates the novels of George Eliot, Dickens, Hardy, and Tolstoy in its detailed plotting, large cast of characters, size, and measured pace. The concluding statement of Gray's review provides a reason for the decline of the type of reading portrayed by Coles:

Victorian novels were not brisk because people had plenty of time to spend with them. Now it is difficult to go home after work, put some wood in the fireplace, light candles or gas lamps, and settle in for a long, peaceful evening.²

Gray's statement indicates that a relationship exists between readers of a particular time, the reading of that time, and its literature. The nature of this relationship has been discussed in such works as John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and Thomas J. Roberts's *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

If libraries in general, and public libraries in particular, are to serve their constituencies in the final years of the twentieth century, they must expand their understanding of the readers, the reading, and the literature of our time. This does not require abandoning the image of reading that Coles portrays. It does require us to see the breadth of reading that is taking place around us. Along with this expanded vision, we must also develop an appreciation for the benefits and pleasures derived from the wide range of behaviors we have categorized as "reading for pleasure."

Snapshots From Our Time

Janice Radway and Jane Tompkins provide us with images of reading from our time. Neither Radway nor Tompkins presents a complete picture of the entire range of reading that is present in today's culture. They do, however, provide glimpses of how certain types of literature fit into the lives of particular groups of people. Radway focuses on women who read romances, while Tompkins examines Westerns and the occupants of a homeless shelter who read Westerns.

Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) is an ethnographic study of a group of women who are devoted fans of the romance genre. Most of the women described in Radway's study were married and mothers. All except one had earned a high school diploma, and forty-three percent of her sample had some college education.³ Radway's study describes the daily lives of these women, lives filled with the "tyranny of busyness." The women are supermoms — housekeepers, cooks, chauffeurs, nurses, mothers, wives, and, in some cases, part-time workers who contribute to the family's financial resources. All of these activities are "other" focused.

When the women in Radway's study were asked why they read romances, the two top reasons given were for simple relaxation and because "reading is just for me; it is my time."⁴ Radway also discovered that "an intensely felt but insufficiently met need for nurturance drives these women to repeated encounters with romance fiction."⁵ While they read a great many novels each year, the women do not passively accept whatever the publishing houses offer. They have clear-cut ideas about whether a specific romance is "good" or not. More significant, however, is Radway's statement about the benefit these women derive from reading these novels:

Although Dot and her customers cannot formally identify the particular features of the romantic fantasy that are the source of its therapeutic value to them, they are certain, nonetheless, that the activity of romance reading is pleasurable and restorative as well.⁶

Jane Tompkins's *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) provides another view of reading in our time by focusing on the evolution of the Western as a genre. Where Radway studied the readers themselves, Tompkins examined the cultural and social forces that created and popularized the Western. Her unique view of the cultural reason behind the Western and its popularity is summed up when she states:

The Western doesn't have anything to do with the West as such. It isn't about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It is about men's fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the

Western tirelessly reinvents.⁷

One of the most interesting parts of Tompkins's work is her description of how the works of one Western writer affect a man she came to know while doing volunteer work in a homeless shelter. The name she gives this man is "Santos." Santos was a Chiricahua Apache. At the time of his meeting with Tompkins, Santos was about to return to his reservation to run for tribal chief. He had read many Westerns and was a devoted fan of Louis L'Amour. When Tompkins and Santos discussed the date of L'Amour's death Tompkins realized that:

Santos cares about this date more than I do, even though I write about L'Amour, because for him L'Amour was more than a subject for contemplation, more than an author. He'd read all of L'Amour's novels five times. He had spent a lot of time in the world L'Amour invented. He knew it well, had lived it in his mind, and had also seen it and lived it in his life. Santos, like L'Amour, had been a wandering man and, like L'Amour and Grey, seemed to be one of those for whom the relation between reading and living was incredibly close.⁸

These snapshots from our time balance Coles's portrait of reading. In all three cases, individuals chose to interact with a particular set of texts because the texts satisfied some need in their lives.⁹ The Coleses shared books that both enjoyed. They found pleasure not only in reading a text but also in sharing it. For the women in Radway's book and the man in Tompkins's studies, individuals from our own time, the reading experience and the chosen texts are different. In these two cases, texts are selected that allow the individuals to explore and satisfy internal, personal needs. For the women in Radway's study, it is a need to nurture themselves by making time for themselves and by reading texts in which a caring, giving woman eventually receives her reward. For the man in Tompkins's study, it is an opportunity to have his world validated and confirmed through a text that explores a land he knows very well. It is both difficult and dangerous to speculate about which texts meet the highest need or which serve the highest purpose. To do so would involve judging not only the value of the texts, but also the worth of the individuals who read them. Both types of judgment are inappropriate for a democratic society and for a profession with democratic ideals.

Meeting the Needs of the People

A library participates in the democracy of readers to the extent that it provides access to the materials that readers want to read. Providing access includes selecting materials, organizing materials for ease of use, responding to requests for these materials and for information about them, and, finally, promoting their use. These tasks are common to all types of materials in all libraries. Popular fiction, however, provides libraries with some special challenges. The remainder of this article elaborates on these challenges.

Prior to discussing each task in detail, it is important to make a distinction between passive and active strategies as they relate to access. Passive strategies are those that involve little or no contact between patrons and library staff. Displays and booklists are passive strategies. Active strategies are those in which library staff interact with patrons. Engaging in a readers' advisory interview or hosting book discussion groups are two active strategies. One way to evaluate a library's effectiveness in pro-

moting access to popular fiction is to examine all of the strategies used in that library. This examination should note which tasks are done occasionally and which are done consistently and the mix of passive and active strategies the library employs.

The first challenge of popular fiction is to identify the materials. The standard reviewing sources used by libraries to select fiction such as *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Kirkus Reviews* do not provide adequate coverage of popular fiction in several genres. In *Horror Literature: A Reader's Guide*, Neil Barron reports that in 1988, 446 original fantasy and horror novels were published. Of these 446, *Library Journal* reviewed 45, *Booklist* reviewed 60, *Publishers Weekly* reviewed 125, and *Kirkus Reviews* reviewed 20. In order to get adequate coverage of these two genres, librarians need to consult reviewing sources that focus on the genres. For example, during the same time period *Locus* reviewed 150 titles, and *Science Fiction Chronicle*, reviewed between 200 and 250 titles.¹⁰ A telephone survey of six urban North Carolina public libraries revealed that only one library subscribed to *Science Fiction Chronicle* but that it did not use this publication for selection. Another library subscribed to the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, and the library did consult it for selection purposes.¹¹ If these six libraries are typical, it can be

inferred that it is not standard practice in North Carolina's public libraries to consult genre specific sources for selection purposes.

After material is selected, it must be organized for patron use. Libraries employ two basic strategies in the organization of materials. The first is cataloging, the second is the physical arrangement of materials. Popular fiction provides special challenges to the profession in these two areas. Clare Beghtol includes a thorough discussion of the issues relating to the classification of fiction in her two-part article "Access to Fiction: A Problem in Classification

Theory and Practice."¹² Beghtol also notes that libraries have largely ignored the challenge of providing subject access to fiction. However, progress is being made in this area. Two important developments are the publication of *Guidelines on Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction, Drama, Etc.* by the Subject Analysis Committee of the American Library Association's Association for Library Collections and Technical Services¹³ and the decision by OCLC to allow certain libraries to add subject headings to bibliographic records for works of fiction contained in OCLC's database.¹⁴

The lack of subject access to fiction has forced library users interested in popular fiction to rely on browsing to discover new authors and titles of interest.¹⁵ Libraries wishing to promote the circulation of popular fiction must therefore pay particular attention to the shelf arrangement of their collections. Research conducted by Sharon L. Baker shows that libraries with collections of over six thousand titles should consider either separating their fiction by genre or identifying the genre of a specific title through the use of spine-labels.¹⁶ Both methods have been shown to increase the circulation of genre fiction and to alert browsers to authors they might otherwise overlook.¹⁷ The patrons in Baker's study also indicated that these methods made it easier for them to select a book that met their needs.¹⁸ Another pattern for shelf arrangement is mentioned by Mary Kay Chelton. Chelton suggests that libraries should consider arranging their "series romance" titles by series and in numerical order. This arrangement will assist readers in locating the works of a favorite author because series romance publishers list the numbers of an

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author's previous work in the author's latest title.¹⁹

Shelf arrangement is not the only passive strategy available to librarians. Two others are the use of displays and the distribution of booklists. The effectiveness of book displays in promoting the use of library materials has been documented in Sharon Baker's articles "Overload, Browsers and Selection,"²⁰ and "The Display Phenomenon: An Exploration into Factors Causing the Increased Circulation of Displayed Books."²¹ A student of Baker's, Nancy Parrish, has also established that booklists assist patrons in locating authors and titles of interest.²²

Selection and organization of popular materials are passive strategies for providing access to popular fiction. The provision of readers' advisory services is an active strategy used in many libraries. Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown define readers' advisory service as "a patron-oriented service for adult fiction readers."²³ This service involves learning about popular fiction and what is appealing about these texts, developing the skills needed for conducting a readers' advisory interview, and becoming familiar with reference sources that provide information on popular fiction.²⁴ Until recently, becoming familiar with these reference sources meant studying the *Fiction Catalog* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1991). Publishing in this area, however, has increased, and each year several new reference sources for popular fiction are produced. In addition to the *Fiction Catalog*, a librarian interested in promoting popular fiction should consult sources such as the third edition of Betty Rosenberg's *Genrelecting* (Littleton: Libraries Unlimited, 1991) and Neil Barron's *What Do I Read Next?: A Reader's Guide to Current Genre Fiction* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992). An excellent source for information about the wide range of reference sources covering popular fiction is Sharon Baker's "Aids in Readers' Advisory."²⁵

A final way that the library can provide access to popular

fiction is through book discussion groups and group programs. In "Let's Talk About It: Lessons in Adult Humanities Programming," Joan C. Durrance and Rhea J. Rubin demonstrate that book discussion groups can be effective in promoting access to popular literature.²⁶ Through these discussion groups individuals were able to interact not only with specific texts but also with each other. Sharing of reading with other readers is an important part of the reading experience for some patrons. Durrance and Rubin close their article with a quote from one "Let's Talk About It" participant:

Books have been to me, since I read *Tarzan of the Apes* at about age twelve, as life-sustaining as air, water, and food. Therefore, this series of meetings with my contemporaries has been refreshing, satisfying, and downright stimulating. The interlocking of mind and inquiry has 'made my day.'²⁷

An important element in the "Let's Talk About It" program was the focus on popular materials; too often library programming has been confined to the classics. A "Let's Talk About It" program that began at the Durham County Public Library during early 1992 continues this new focus. This program entitled "Mysteries: Clues to How We Think," drew an audience of between fifty and sixty participants at each of its five meetings.²⁸ A step beyond the mere discussion of genre fiction was reported in "Angle of Vision: Interpreting Contemporary Western Fiction in Public Libraries." This article describes a program that used oral interpreters to perform selections from popular contemporary Westerns. Following the performance, the audience participated in discussions facilitated by scholars; study guides were also available.²⁹

Conclusion

Wayne Booth, author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, said the following as part of the discussion series on the contemporary Western mentioned above: "Stories are essential to life . . . They are essential in the process that makes us into who we are."³⁰

Librarians have a wide range of strategies available to them in assisting individuals striving to become who they are. These strategies vary from the way we arrange books on the shelves to providing a place where readers can meet and actively discuss the reading that matters to them. It is vitally important that we not adhere to one view of readers, or assign value to only one type of reading. To do so is to attempt to re-create the public in our own image. That is not the role of our profession. Our role is to assist people in becoming who they want to be. Providing patrons with the stories they want to read is one of this profession's highest callings; meeting this challenge can be one of its greatest rewards.

*** Author's Note:** A portion of the title for this article is a paraphrase of S. R. Ranganathan's "Second Law of Library Science." That law is "Every Person His or Her Book!" Individuals interested in learning more about Ranganathan and his laws should consult: Lee W. Finks, "A Centennial Salute to Ranganathan," in *American Libraries* 27 (July/August, 1992): 593-94.

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- 1 Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), xi.
- 2 Paul Gray, "The Quincunx," *Time* (January 29, 1990): 74.
- 3 Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 55-56.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 45.

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⁸ Ibid., 222-23.

⁹ The work of Radway and Tompkins is paralleled by the work of two librarians. Catherine Sheldrick Ross studied one hundred public library users and what they read for pleasure. Her study provides insight into the relationship between readers and their books, how readers select their books, and what they think about the provision of fiction in libraries. See Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Readers' Advisory Service: New Directions," RQ 30 (Summer 1991): 503-18. In "Unrestricted Body Parts and Predictable Bliss: The Audience Appeal of Formula Romances," Mary Kay Chelton follows Tompkins by giving her view of why one woman reads romances and how libraries can more effectively serve this group of readers. See *Library Journal* 116 (July 1991): 44-49.

¹⁰ Neil Barron, ed., *Horror Literature: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 332-33.

¹¹ Telephone survey conducted during July 20-24, 1992, by the author. The following systems were contacted: Charlotte/Mecklenburg County Public Library, Cumberland County Public Library and Information Center, Durham County Library, Forsyth County Public Library, Greensboro Public Library, and Wake County Public Libraries.

¹² Clare Beghtol, "Access to Fiction: A Problem in Classification Theory and Practice." Part I, *International Classification* 16 (1989): 134-40; Part II, *International Classification* 17 (1990): 21-26.

¹³ Subject Analysis Committee, Association for Library Collections and Technical Services, American Library Association, *Guidelines on Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction, Drama, Etc.* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1990).

¹⁴ Judy Quinn and Michael Rogers "OCLC/LC Fiction Headings Project: Too Little, Too Late?" *Library Journal* 117 (February 1, 1992): 14-15.

¹⁵ Sharon L. Baker, "Will Fiction Classification Schemes

Increase Use," RQ 27 (Spring, 1988): 366.

¹⁶ Ibid., 374.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Chelton, 49.

²⁰ Sharon L. Baker, "Overload, Browsers, and Selections," *Library and Information Science Research* 8 (October-December, 1986): 315-29.

²¹ Sharon L. Baker, "Display Phenomenon: An Exploration into Factors Causing the Increased Circulation of Displayed Books," *Library Quarterly* 56 (July 1986): 237-57.

²² Nancy Parrish, "The Effect of a Booklist on the Circulation of Fiction Books Which Have Not Been Borrowed from a Public Library in Four Years or Longer." (June 1986). ERIC Document ED282564.

²³ Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989): 1. This book also contains an excellent overview of how a library can assist patrons in locating titles of interest.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sharon L. Baker, "Aids in Readers' Advisory," *U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D Librarian* 74 (1990): 25-28.

²⁶ Joan C. Durrance and Rhea J. Rubin, "Let's Talk About It: Lessons in Adult Humanities Programming," *Public Libraries* 28 (March/April 1989): 90-96.

²⁷ Ibid., 96.

²⁸ Telephone conversation with Pam Jaskot on July 24, 1992.

²⁹ Kristin B. Valentine and Janet L. Jacobsen, "Angle of Vision: Interpreting Contemporary Western American Fiction in Public Libraries," *Public Libraries* 31 (May/June 1992): 145-57.

³⁰ Ibid., 148.

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