Creating a new kind of readers’ advisory service reenergized staff and increased the relevance of the Tulsa City-County Library

By Rebecca Howard & Laura Raphael

Your Next Great Read

Readers’ advisory (RA) has been a service of public libraries for decades. Librarians have used many strategies to connect individual readers with books: displays, in-person RA interviews, discussion groups, read-alike lists, posters, blogs, and social networking tools.

This is important because reading is alive and well in our country. A whopping 79 percent of American adults read a book in the past month, according to the recent Pew Research Center report “Reading Habits in Different Communities.” Committed readers are often the most active champions of public libraries; deeply engaging with them helps to ensure library relevancy and sustainability.

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Like many librarians, however, we faced a disconnect when it came to providing face-to-face RA service. We didn’t always get the opportunity to do so. Most library customers didn’t know they could ask for book suggestions at Tulsa’s large urban Central Library. On the rare occasions when people approached the desk to request “a good book to read,” the responses varied dramatically depending on who was working the desk and how comfortable they felt answering RA questions.

While we wanted to draw readers through stories that would inform, educate, delight, and even empower them and establish relationships so we could follow up with these readers, we fell far short of that ideal. Frequently, we froze up and could not think of a title, or had to cut our interactions short because the desk became too busy. We sought ways to reach more readers and improve the quality of the face-to-face RA service we provided.

Our answer came in the form of personalized, form-based RA. Such a model was first launched a decade ago by the Williamsburg Regional Library, VA. Reading Neal Hollands’s 2006 article “Improving the Model for Interactive Readers’
Personalized Reading Suggestions for Jane Reader

**Appeal Factors**

1. Selected books are based upon the following criteria: interests and appeal factors:
   - Themes: Mystery, Thriller, Horror, Romance
   - Interest in specific genres
   - Titles receiving positive reviews or awards
   - Titles connecting to a personal interest

**Authors you might like**

- **Liz Gardner**
  - *The Good Son*
  - *The Secrets of Eden*—recommendations from the library’s mystery section

- **Denise Lebo**
  - *The Collected*—personalized recommendations from the library’s non-fiction section

- **John Sanborn**
  - *The Secret Garden*—recommendations from the library’s young adult section

- **Dan Simmons**
  - *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*—recommendations from the library’s science fiction section

**Titles you might enjoy**

- **Dawn of the Planet of the Apes**
  - *The Good Son*
  - *The Secrets of Eden*
  - *The Collected*
  - *The Secret Garden*
  - *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*

**Recommendations for Jane Reader**

- **Liz Gardner**
  - *The Good Son*
  - *The Secrets of Eden*

- **Denise Lebo**
  - *The Collected*

- **John Sanborn**
  - *The Secret Garden*

- **Dan Simmons**
  - *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*

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**Launching "Your Next Great Read"**

In 2011, we launched Your Next Great Read, Tulsa City-County Library’s personalized, form-based RA service. Since then, our team has completed nearly 1000 guides for readers (as right for an example of the first two pages of a completed guide), who have been largely universally appreciative of the personalized service. We regularly get comments like these:

"You did a wonderful job! I am so excited to read these books. I tried Goodreads, but I feel like this service is better because I actually get a chance to say why I liked or didn't like a book and what's important to me when looking for something new to read. It is also helpful to be told why someone picked this book for you."

This is excellent! This is the first time I have used Your Next Great Read, and I was not expecting personalized service. I thought it would be a computer-generated list. I love the personal attention to my questionnaire, and the suggestions and comments from a real person make them so much more meaningful. I especially love the "Reasons" you have given for selecting the books. It's great hearing the opinion of another reader. There are five books in the list that I plan to read based on your comments alone... I am very much appreciative; thank you.

The new service provided the personal engagement with readers and gave us the time and space to consider fully the best choices for the tastes and preferences of each reader."
and match each individual reader to the best R.A librarian for their needs.

Forming a service
The process of creating Your Next Great Read was not easy. We spent nearly eight months researching the service, planning how we could do it, experimenting with various approaches, and, finally, getting approval and buy-in from various administrative levels in our library. Then we selected and trained people to staff the team and figured out how to market and promote the service, organize the responses, and keep everything running smoothly.

Maintaining the Your Next Great Read service is not a cinch, either. We have all become better and faster at initiating guides, but it still takes time and considerable effort to consider a reader’s individual preferences and select authors and titles that are a good match. Keeping track of all of the forms and guides and communicating with readers take time and effort, too.

Despite the work, generating and implementing a personalized, form-based R.A service is worth it. It is one of the best services a library can offer to energize staff and connect with readers. It increases the library’s relevance and value in the eyes of users.

The list of benefits in our initial proposal is an excellent overview of why libraries should consider starting a similar service:

- Allows time for customer and staff to complete a deeper and deliberate R.A interaction
- Promotes the additional R.A services provided by the library
- Validates reading suggestions as an important, integral part of library services
- Gives staff and customers a way to discuss books using appeal factors
- Creates a tangible “product” that is seen as more valuable in the eyes of staff and customers
- Offers a human and democratic alternative in the marketplace of reading/viewing suggestions (i.e., Amazon, Netflix, Barnes & Noble personal shopper, Goodreads, etc.).

A boost to staff morale
The most surprising benefit of Your Next Great Read was the boost it gave to staff morale, energy, and confidence.

Creating personalized reading guides is intellectually challenging and psychologically rewarding. Unlike the automatic, low-level tasks of circulation, shelving, and simple reference work (retrieving the phone number for the local PetSmart on Peoria Avenue, or the winning numbers from the latest Powerball drawing), carefully considering the sense of why a reader enjoys certain works and then locating titles that will fulfill specific reading tastes are interesting, complex, and relevant to both our professional and personal goals and values.

Furthermore, after creating a certain number of reading guides (around 125 guides in two years from the two of us; our team of 12 staffers create, on average, two guides per month), you start to feel like an R.A superstar. Walking into the fiction stacks with a customer who loves Janet Evanovich—and finding not a single Stephanie Plum on the shelf—isn’t as daunting as it once was. Watching the reaction as you suggest read-alike after read-alike and discuss intelligently each one from the store of knowledge you’ve developed in constructing these guides is enormously gratifying. You know you’re an expert. So does your reader. That kind of authority is rewarding for both librarian and library customer alike.

We enjoyed our jobs before, but it’s not an overstatement to say that helping readers through Your Next Great Read has transformed our daily lives in a profoundly positive way.

Working a public library desk can be exhausting and dispiriting in
Creating Reading Guides: Readiness Is All

To start creating personalized reading guides, the more preparation, the better.
Here are Tulsa's top form-based readers' advisory (RA) readiness tips:

1. Training, training, training. To ensure good personalized reading guides, have a firm grounding in RA precepts as well as a general knowledge of popular genres and authors.
   We developed our own RA training course to prepare our Your Next Great Read team. If such training is not an option, recommend these excellent resources:
   - The Popular Fiction Checklist created by the Adult Reading Round Table (ARRT) of Illinois (www.arrtreads.org)
   - The Readers' Advisory Toolbox available via NovelList
   - Book Lust and More Book Lust by Nancy Pearl
   For training on form-based RA in particular, including practice in creating reading guides, ALA Editions will offer for a fee over six-week "Re-Thinking Readers' Advisory: An Interactive Approach" course starting on November 4.

2. Create your form carefully—and don’t be afraid to change it! The reading guide you give to readers begins with the form they complete describing their own reading tastes and desires. If your form doesn’t help you identify what readers are looking for—especially what appeals to them most—you won’t be able to create a valuable guide for them.
   First look at what other libraries have done. Our first form was based on what Williamsburg Regional Library, VA, uses for its "Looking for a good book?" service. We were also charmed by Seattle Public Library’s "Your Next 5 Reads," a form that invites readers to describe books and authors they’ve enjoyed in the past and why.

3. Always be reading. Reading widely in a variety of genres and paying attention to their appeal factors is one of the best ways to know where to start looking for authors and titles to include in a personalized reading guide. If you’ve read, or at least have heard of, Tracy Chevalier, for example, you’ll know to avoid suggesting legal thrillers for that reader and instead explore other European historical novels.

4. Remember: It’s an RA interview...on paper. If you have any experience or training in RA work, you’re ahead of the curve. What makes this service different from the typical, in-person RA interview is that it’s conducted through the medium of writing. The form gives readers the space to consider their own tastes, but it also allows them to think about reading appeals and applying your knowledge and tools to find the best work for each user.

Don’t be afraid to change your form according to what is working and what is not. Responding to an informal evaluation by our team members, we shortened and refined our form, deleting sections librarians weren't using—and that many readers neglected to complete—and adding more open-ended questions. These changes improved the reading guides and more were completed as a result.

More ways than one. This “emotional labor” cuts both ways, however. When you increase your positive interactions with the people you help directly, the impact of common, daily library problems dissipates. Your Next Great Read is not about the form, the survey tool, or even the guide itself; it is about people connecting to people and generating relationships around the act of reading. This relationship is a powerful and positive one—for reader and librarian alike.

For example, as a freshman in college, Rebecca Howard read Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine in a Native American literature course. Never having read anything like this before, Rebecca changed her major to English soon after and became a lifelong believer in story. Twenty years later, she had the opportunity to share Erdrich with another reader through Your Next Great Read. In a follow-up survey, this reader singled out Erdrich as a new favorite in response to the question, “Please list authors or books from your earlier set of suggestions that you particularly enjoyed.” She wrote, “All of Louise Erdrich” and continued, “Your selections were perfect for me. Thank you.” This interaction was enough to keep Howard smiling the rest of the day.

Advisory as advocacy
More than energizing staff, implementing Your Next Great Read has positioned our library as a central place for serving readers, strengthening our impact on the community.

We are admirers of the “life cycle librarianship” model that Bill Crowley developed, which emphasizes the role of public libraries as supporting reading and lifelong learning. He argues that libraries will remain relevant and valuable by addressing the “human learning needs from lapsit to nursing home.” Our experience with Your Next Great read has borne that out.

Laura Raphael recently met a Your Next Great Read participant while she was working at the public service desk. Glancing at Raphael’s name badge, this customer exclaimed, “Wait, you’re Laura? You made my reading guide!” A bit nervously, Raphael asked how the woman liked the suggestions, and the enthusiastic response was—“Are you kidding? I’ve loved most of them so far! You’re my new best friend! Now whenever I’m looking for something to read, I just go back to your list, and I know I’m going to find something good.”

This librarian-reader connection, in addition to earning new best friends, forms the core of quality readers’ advisory service. The enthusiasm in this customer’s response is her saying, “You get me!” Our affirmation and understanding of readers not only result in satisfied customers, they also create a strong foundation of public support for the library’s role in the community.