By Catherine Sheldrick Ross & Mary K. Chelton

REFERENCE LIBRARIANS often say they feel unprepared to answer that classic question, “Can you recommend a good book to read?” Because all readers are different, reader’s advisors know they can’t have one answer for everyone. The challenge is to help match a reader to the right book at the right time. But circulation statistics and best sellers lists can only go so far. The key issue—as recent research has shown—is the mood of the patron.

This has major implications for enhancing reader’s advisory service. Not only must librarians be enthusiastic and service-oriented—which is not always the case, as LJ reported recently (“A Look at Reader’s Advisory Services,” LJ 9/15/00, p. 40-43). They also must discern what patrons want from the reading experience and what costs (such as in time and difficulty) they are willing to pay.

Laying the groundwork

Between 1985 and 2000, Catherine Ross and students in her MLIS course on “Genres of Fiction and Reading” at the University of Western Ontario interviewed 194 committed readers to find out how they chose books for pleasure reading and what elements they sought. Interviewers were instructed to pick the most readerly person they knew, so most interviewees fall within the ten percent of the North American population who are “heavy readers”—people who read upward of a book a week. The demographic profile was consistent with other surveys: 65 percent female, 35 percent male. The age range was 16-80. Most were well educated, though some readers, especially older ones, had received little formal education. They all considered pleasure reading essential to their lives.

Most interviewees said their choices for pleasure reading involved many interrelated considerations. They often started with their own mood at the time and went on to describe how they find new authors or what clues they seek on the book itself. These systems usually depended upon considerable previous experience and knowledge of authors, publishers, cover art, and conventions for promoting books and sometimes on a social network of family or friends who recommended and loaned books.

At times, especially when they were adolescents or when they were moving to a new stage of reading, readers said they were dissatisfied with how they found and chose books. With practice and persistence, however, by adulthood most had developed a satisfying system. In this respect, they differ decidedly from nonbook readers, reluctant readers, and novice readers. Thus, an understanding of the strategies used by avid readers can help reader’s advisors work better with all readers, especially inexperienced ones.

Balancing the mood

The bedrock issue is the reader’s mood: What do I feel like reading now? What will I feel like reading in the future that I should borrow or buy now? (Mood was more critical for choosing fiction—which most in the survey read—rather than for choosing nonfiction.)

Mood, of course, varies. When readers are busy or under stress, they often want safety, reassurance, and confirmation. They will reread old favorites or read new books by trusted authors. When life is less stressful, they can afford to take more risks. They may want to be amazed by something unpredictable and might pick books on sheer impulse, even through random selection of an author’s name.

Readers adopted various strategies to establish the right balance, between safety/certainty and novelty/risk. Since readers are reluctant in bookstores to indulge in a “cold buy,” libraries support such risk-taking with new and unfamiliar authors, genres, or subject areas.
Reader strategies

Committed readers typically scan their everyday environments for clues about books to read next. They tuck away, in memory or on lists, the names of books and authors and develop a store of personal knowledge about authors, titles, and genres. They draw on trusted sources with tastes known to be compatible, including reviewers, friends, family members, selected bookstore staff, and librarians, and—more recently—Internet acquaintances. Because of their strong commitment to reading, the readers in this study were a key alerting source for others.

The single most important strategy for selection was to choose a book by a known and trusted author. Said a Salman Rushdie fan, “It’s like finding a gold mine and following the vein,” while a le Carré devotee said, “It’s very safe to know that you’ve got an author whom you like, and there are eight more books sitting there waiting.” After choosing by author, the second most popular strategy was to use genre. They also use clues provided by the book cover, the blurb on the back, and samples of prose, either the first paragraph or a random selection.

Keys to selection

Typically, a single factor took precedence, with other factors coming into play. A reader might want a mystery story, but the choice could depend on additional elements such as a smart female detective, love interest, or a regional setting. Another might say that the major requirement is “nothing depressing or frightening,” but she also wants to be “transported, moved into a world that’s different.”

For others, the book’s size is key: “The third thing I look at [after author and the description on the back cover] is the thickness. I will reject a book even if it’s a book by an author whom I know if it’s small, little book.” In narrowing down choices, readers are strongly guided by what they don’t want, so that they can quickly rule out whole categories (“nothing too long”) and entire genres (“the psychological thriller”).

Once the reader starts to browse within a range of books, then the cover and the clues provided on the book itself become important. Titles are also important—readers said they were drawn both to an unusual, catchy title (in the case of an unfamiliar book) and to a familiar title that struck a chord. One sf reader said, “When you’re as genre-specific as I am and read as voraciously as I do, you’re looking for some quick identifiers on what’s a good book. It’ll take me ten minutes to go in [to the sf section], get five books, and leave because I’m just so familiar with the genre.”

Choosing a Book for Pleasure

The most frequently mentioned “quick identifiers” were the cover, the blurb on the back, and the writing sample. The sample paragraph or page was often a final test, used as an indicator of the writing style and the level of literary competence demanded by the book.

Reasons for rejection

The interviewed readers were emphatic about what they don’t like and used cues on the book itself—e.g., foul language or mass market fiction. Typically readers ruled out books with particular content (too much sex/violence/horror/profane language); books with an undesired emotional effect (“makes me depressed”); books with unappealing characters (drippy heroines, violent heroes, and alpha males); and books written in an unappealing style.

When readers reject a book as “poorly written,” they often mean that the book was successfully written to achieve an effect that they personally dislike—too sexually arousing, too scary, too sentimental, too full of verbal effects, too descriptive, or too literary for them. A fan of the stripped-down Hemingway style might dislike the sensuous language of romance and declare that all romances are “poorly written.” Not surprisingly, the most frequent response to the question about books that would not be chosen was to specify a particular genre, especially romance, Westerns, and horror.

A feature that strongly attracted one reader could equally put off another, but in each case the information helped match book and reader. For example, a die-cut mauve cover with a title in cursive, ornate lettering or a black cover spattered with gore each advertise themselves to their respective genre readers while at the same time warning off others who dislike romance or horror. Readers stressed the need to evaluate cues critically, as covers can be deceptive.

One reader chose books that won prizes, while another said he avoided prize winners because the basis for such prizes is usually “a type of literary excellence that doesn’t particularly make for enjoyable reading.”

The final factor in book selection involves the reader’s calculation of the degree of work required to appropriate the book, both physically and mentally. Some readers said that they often read “what’s around me” or “books I find at home.” Conversely, readers reported being willing to put themselves on waiting lists, special-order, or pay hardcover prices to read a book that they expected to yield much pleasure. It follows that people who want to promote a particular book choice can try to convince the reader of its worth and also make it easier to find.
Our analysis suggests that a comprehensive model for the process of choosing a book to read for pleasure must include five related elements, summarized in the chart, p. 53.

**What this means for you**

Reader's advisory service encompasses a range of techniques, from the personal and interactive (via an interview) to the impersonal and passive (such as displays or lists of suggested titles). However, while library systems and readers use some of the same categories to group together potential titles in meaningful ways, other categories important to readers are neglected.

Librarians—and the published or web-based reader’s advisory tools they use—tend to categorize books by author, subject, setting, characters, genre, literary prize winners, and movie or TV tie-ins. While readers do use these categories, they also choose books by their appeal to emotion and mood, by selective personal or media sources, by browsing and serendipity, and by the “cost” involved. Librarians must pay more attention to these areas.

1 **Responding to the reading experience wanted**

When librarians query readers at the desk, they should ask, “Tell me what you’re in the mood for” or “Tell me what kind of reading experience you’re looking for.” This question should probably precede “Tell me about a book that you’ve read and enjoyed,” which Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown suggest in their indispensable Readers’ Advisory Services for Adults in the Public Library (ALA, 1997). Asking about books they have previously read may be problematic if readers now want a different emotional experience.

Categorizing titles by mood and emotion requires librarians to think beyond literary and topical criteria for grouping books. “Easy” and “familiar” in this regard become desirable characteristics, not reasons for ignoring either the story or its potential readers. These categorizations also require looking at genres differently, since most genres at different levels encompass both familiarity and novelty, or both safety and risk. In genres such as sf, familiarity with the genre itself makes anything in the genre easy and well known if a reader is widely read in it, whereas almost anything in the genre is difficult or novel for those unfamiliar with its conventions. On the other hand, an appeal to emotion and mood also allows for groupings across genres for readers when mood trumps genre.

An easy way to exploit emotional appeal is to categorize stories by happy and sad endings or by upbeat and cynical tones. This could be used to sort books appearing on lists of award-winning or recommended books or books made familiar through course curricula. While Oprah’s books all seem to feature women overcoming adversity, some readers would want to know that The Pilot’s Wife is in no way upbeat with a happy ending, unlike Tara Road. Love stories include not only romance genre titles with the expected happy ending but also titles like Robert James Waller’s Bridges of Madison County, Wilbur Smith’s Eagle in the Sky, or Hilma Wolitzer’s Endings, all of which are, if not sad, at least bittersweet. Even within a specific genre framework such as romance with its inevitably happy endings, some authors are also hilariously funny, such as Cathie Linz, Jennifer Crusie, and Susan Elizabeth Phillips, while authors like Judith Duncan can offer moody and tormented stories.

Familiarity and novelty can make an interesting way to split promotion for subcategories. For example, within horror, part of Stephen King’s appeal is the way he uses very familiar settings such as the supermarket, whereas the unusual Calcutta setting itself is the actual horror in Dan Simmons’s award-winning Song of Kali. Caleb Carr’s The Alienist fascinates many readers because of its clever use of Victorian mores and setting, whereas other mystery readers prefer more familiar, contemporary settings.

Librarians doing reader’s advisory work can use these emotional categories to create synonyms or euphemisms for list and display titles and the books to go with them. Words and phrases like “clean,” “faithful,” and “tried and true” can be used for familiar, safe, reassuring stories. “Provocative,” “unusual,” “shivery,” “gritty,” or “different takes” can be used for challenging, critical, frightening, hard-hitting, or new perspective stories, respectively.

2 **Responding to the need for sources about new books**

Most libraries already post the New York Times and other local best sellers lists, the Oprah book lists, as well as the American Library Association’s Notable Books lists from the Reference and User Services Association. This form of reader’s advisory promotion can be expanded. A bulletin board of ads cut or copied from newspapers and magazines for books, including the weekly genre and category notices from Amazon.com, might help readers.

A labeled shelf and list of current or recent movie and TV dramatizations of books should be a staple of reader’s advisory. Inviting known, influential narrators to read from favorite stories for a National Library Week program or to name them for an annotated giveaway list and display is another tactic.

One technique not often exploited is to make available recommendations from friends, co-workers, or other personally known individuals. With the permission of the recommender, libraries could easily create lists of recommended books, organized by the name and position of the person making the recommendation. A form to elicit recommendations could be developed and inserted in books and videos, and returned forms could be grouped in a notebook at the service desk or on the library’s web site. This is similar to Amazon’s lists of books also bought by the same people who purchased the title of interest.

Libraries must improve browsability to help readers choose books by serendipity. Much of this is covered in Sharon Baker’s Responsive Public Library Collection: How To Develop and Market It (Libraries Unlimited, 1993). Merchandising goes far beyond lists and displays, emphasizing the strategic use of space, especially in four areas: the entrance or “front end” of the library, the ends
of stacks, high traffic areas, and the circulation desk area.

All four of these "magic spots" should be filled with books, not posters, signs, community announcements, or anything else librarians often put there. Although most online circulation systems make it possible to note changes in shelf location, merchandised titles usually circulate so fast that it may not be worth the effort. The idea that everything on the shelves should be in alphabetical or classification order is antithetical to the browsing needs of readers.

3 Responding to the elements of a book

Subjects and settings are usually well indexed in reader’s advisory services and tools, and characters are indexed to some extent. But librarians or those producing reader’s advisory tools have yet to exploit treatment, types of beginnings and endings, physical size, and combinations thereof. Wouldn’t a “Fat Reads” list revive Helen Hooven Santmyer’s ...And Ladies of the Club?

Some stressed-out readers might want a list of titles for “Vegging Out.” Since readers use these factors in combination, something like “Long Sad Stories” may also work quite well. Subscribers to the electronic mailing list Fiction-L recently discussed promoting books by their first lines, which is exactly what the First Lines web site—produced by a Cornell librarian and engineer (www.people.cornell.edu/pages/jad22)—has already exploited.

4 Responding to clues on the book itself

These factors should be used to group titles by primary and secondary factors in combination, such as mystery + smart female detective, or nothing depressing + something transportive. Since size is important, groupings like “Small but Serious” or “Long on Laughter” make sense, even if the resulting lists are quite eclectic. Since readers also use these factors to exclude titles, librarians could make exclusions a clear part of promoted categories. Examples might be “Bloodless Mysteries” or “Romantic sf.”

Since the author is crucial, we should inform readers when an author changes direction, whether in style, subject matter, or genre. Under the pseudonym J.D. Robb, Nora Roberts’s futuristic, gritty cop/romance stories are avidly read by her fans in large part because her publisher and publicist have gone to great pains, even at the expense of alienating potential sf readers, to alert her romance readers to the change in style and subject matter. Her books are shelved in bookstores with romance titles, and all publicity reads, "Nora Roberts writing as J.D. Robb.”

To help readers make more informed choices, librarians can produce lists, shelf alerts, and displays of popular authors who either write under a pseudonym or write different kinds of books under the same name. Working librarians know that audiobook listeners also choose titles by author, and so many of these suggestions apply also to the audiobook format.

Since readers use covers and sample pages to choose titles, they can be helped by a display of—or web site links to—covers and sample pages or paragraphs. Less avid or novice readers of a new genre may also need help interpreting covers. Orson Scott Card, who has written both sf and fantasy, points out that readers can tell the difference between these genres because sf covers show rivets and fantasy covers show trees. Likewise, sensual romances have a lot of red and swirly letters, whereas sweet romances are usually covered in virginal white. Adding a description of “how to read a cover” to lists, or creating a list and display called “How To Read a Cover,” with suggested authors or titles for each type of cover, should help novice readers.

5 Responding to the cost in time or money

Patrons must balance the expected pleasure in reading a particular book against the cost involved to get it. Libraries should have enough copies of a title at the time people want it, whether it’s a best seller, an Oprah title, a book to be discussed at the next book discussion group meeting, or a book the librarian is reviewing for a group.

While librarians might say that making popular titles available is more of a collection development rather than a reader’s advisory problem, it is a shared problem. There’s simply no point in promoting a title, or taking advantage of the broadcast media’s promotion, if the interest and demand only build longer and longer reserve queues. The longer the queue, the higher the “cost” in waiting time to get the book.

While each library must answer for itself and to its readers the acceptable length of a reserve queue, every library can offer alternatives. The number of Oprah’s recommended books is now large enough that other Oprah choices can be offered. The Harry Potter phenomenon, however, has spawned a new kind of list: “Books To Read While You Wait for the Next Harry Potter Book.” Another technique is to split the order of titles so that half go to fill reserves and the other half to occupy “express” shelves on a no-reserve, first-come, first-served basis.

Librarians also should understand and indicate the intellectual work involved in reading particular titles, whether genre or mainstream. For example, Dan Simmons’s Hyperion, Larry Niven’s Ringworld, and Arthur C. Clarke’s Rendezvous with Rama are all mesmerizing stories for sophisticated sf fans but not for novices. While sf always demands a tolerance for unusual settings, themes, and vocabulary, it also can demand a mental visual acuity and patience with a lack of not only characterization but also—in the case of Rendezvous with Rama—human (or sentient) protagonists.

Sf is not the only genre in which readers need to be alerted to the demands of the text. Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes is inspiring to a great many readers but quite depressing to others. While readers differ in their perception of the effort involved in getting or reading a particular book, it is important to include an acknowledgment of the cost factor both in conversations with readers and in passive techniques such as displays and lists.

Let’s do it better

By acknowledging mood and cost, in conjunction with the criteria normally used by librarians to categorize books, librarians can revolutionize reader’s advisory work. The conclusions should not lead librarians to abandon current strategies but rather to add on to existing successful techniques.

Thematic and topical lists, such as those regularly generated on Fiction-L, can now be scrutinized in a slightly different way, so that they become, in fact, subcategories of larger emotional categories. What is needed for books is a tool like Nancy Peske’s and Beverly West’s Cinematherapy: The Girl’s Guide to Movies for Every Mood (Dell, 1999), the back cover of which says, “Every woman knows...Movies are More than Just Entertainment—They’re Self-Medication.”

Well, avid readers know that about books, too. Librarians just need to open their imagination to these new possibilities for serving all readers, from avid ones to novices.