

Reading as a Contact Sport

Barbara Fister

Alaska Library Association Annual Conference, February 2006

Abstract

Though reading is often considered a solitary pursuit, it is a profoundly social experience. This session will explore the social nature of reading, what librarians can learn about the reading experience from book groups both online and face-to-face, and will explore the role that popular fiction plays in the everyday lives of readers.

I'm going to ask you to do some work throughout this session. From time to time I'm going to ask you to do some free-writing in response to a prompt. To start, I'd like to ask you to take a moment to think back to your very first memory of a library. Where was it? What did it look like? How did you feel when you were there? Who was there with you? Take a few minutes to jot down any impressions you can remember about that library.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with an OCLC market research report published a couple of months ago, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, a large-scale survey conducted for OCLC by Harris Interactive. A major concern of the study was how the public perceives the library as a "brand." The finding? Overwhelmingly, libraries are identified with books. As the cover of this report indicates, this response is very puzzling indeed. Why books, when libraries offer so much more?

According to the authors of the report

It would be delightful to assume that when respondents say "books," what they really mean to say is that books, in essence, stand for those intangible qualities of information familiarity, information trust and information quality. The data did not reveal it. We looked hard. We reviewed thousands of responses to the open-ended questions that inquired about positive library associations and library purpose. We searched for words and phrases that included mentions of "quality," "trust," "knowledge," "learning," "education," etc. We found mentions of each, but they were relatively few in number.

"Books" dominated - across all regions surveyed and across all age groups.

But never fear, all is not lost: the report goes on to say "This global, nostalgic perception should give the library community reason to be concerned, but it also provides a solid base from which to leverage value, and create change, on a large scale. . . Libraries must take this advantage and work collectively to 'rejuvenate' the brand."

It's a little perplexing to me that it's so crucial to rejuvenate a brand that is apparently successful - library visits have doubled in the past ten years and circulation is up in all types of libraries - but evidently the brand needs work because people now can get information elsewhere. It's not that they don't think of libraries as places to find high quality information; the majority of respondents named "providing information" as the main purpose of the library, and they believed the information to be of good quality. It's just that libraries have to share the market for quality information with the Internet. And though sharing is something libraries do rather well, sharing the market is evidently a sign of failure. If people turn to Google instead of to our databases, we must be doing something wrong. If people think of books instead of databases when picturing a library, we need must need better marketing.

Wayne Wiegand has pointed out that while Americans like libraries, and always have, librarians

struggle to define what they're for. Libraries, he says, have done three things exceptionally well for the past century: they make information widely available, they provide places where people can meet for cultural and civic purposes, and they have furnished billions of reading materials to millions of people. (It's not outrageous to borrow McDonald's slogan of "billions served" given there are more libraries in the US than there are McDonald's outlets.)

Librarians have focused their claim for significance almost exclusively on the first of those three functions: they provide information, or as it was called in an earlier era, "useful knowledge." The other two functions - providing a civic space for the public and offering them books to read - are not high priorities because, well, they're not obviously useful. Or perhaps they fail to make *us* feel useful.

This need to narrow the definition of usefulness goes back a long way. At the beginning of the twentieth century it had a name: the "fiction problem." Public libraries, that were intended to elevate and educate the masses, had trouble discouraging their patrons from choosing fiction. At the end of the 19th century, the library director in Allegheny, Pennsylvania reported he had successfully rid his library of Horatio Alger stories and other popular material, saying "It is certainly not the function of the public library to foster the mind-weakening habit of novel-reading among the very classes - the uneducated, busy or idle - whom it is the duty of the public library to lift to a higher plane of thinking." Reading fiction was not only unproductive it was dangerously addictive: "once the habit . . . is formed, it seems as difficult to throw off as the opium habit." In the same vein, in 1906 the Toronto Public library's annual report bragged about their success in decreasing in the circulation of fiction as if they had averted a public health crisis: "there is an indulgence in the reading of trashy novels which is destructive to the mind."

Fortunately, we got over this attitude and made a real contribution to reading communities by providing books without prejudice for a diverse set of tastes and purposes. As Wayne Wiegand has said in discussing the politics of cultural authority,

American public librarians have been willing to serve (if not necessarily to endorse) the democracies of culture manifest in America's multiple reading tastes for most of this century by giving patrons what they want. . . . their professional service in effect has helped millions of 20th-century library patrons evolve multiple canons unique to their own culture. (82)

But though we no longer make a practice of tossing fiction on principle, we continue this tradition of discounting readers' tastes when we disparage books as an outdated "brand" and when we focus our branding - and our research and resources and LIS education - on information rather than what most of the public believes libraries are about. An ALA survey in 2001 asked members of the public what they used libraries for. A whopping 91% said "to borrow books." When asked what skills librarians needed, the skill most desired was "familiarity with a range of books and authors."

When we foreground the importance of "information" we sometimes fail to understand how people actually use information. The ACRL standards for information literacy assume that users first identify a need for information and then take steps to seek it out. In fact, a great deal of information is not sought at all, but rather encountered. Though we insist that providing information is the library's highest purpose, we fail to take into account that readers get information when they read for pleasure. Canadian LIS scholar Catherine Sheldrick Ross found, after interviewing over 200 readers, that people find a wealth of meaning in what they read for pleasure - and a study recently conducted by researchers at the University of Sheffield in the UK confirm her findings. "Many participants believed that reading increased their understanding of people from other background and cultures . . . reading permits the person to see into areas

of society which otherwise would be denied to them and subsequently they are more able to participate fully in a democratic society." The study also said participants felt "reading imaginative literature was vital for keeping their own imagination alive, it also contributed to creative output and problem solving within their own life experience" (39).

Interestingly, psychologist Richard Gerrig has conducted experiments that suggest readers don't distinguish information provided in fictional form from facts presented in other kinds of texts. The less readers know about the subject matter of the fictional work, the more likely they are to accept material in it as factual. He adds, "even when readers actively try to discredit fictional information, they may have called to mind other beliefs that will persevere after the fiction itself has been unaccepted" (237). Information, not sought deliberately but encountered in imaginative literature, becomes part of one's knowledge base, for better or worse. Epistemologically speaking, we don't shelve fiction separately from non-fiction.

I'd like to pause again and give you a chance to do a bit of reflection. This time, spend a couple of minutes thinking about your personal reading practices. What do you enjoy reading? What do you get out of it? Have you ever had your beliefs or your understanding of an issue influenced by a work of fiction?

Apart from our neglecting the importance of pleasure reading in the lives of library users, there's a popular misconception that feeds libraries' fear of obsolescence - that reading is on the decline, that the Internet is crowding out reading, that young people aren't interested in books, that books are no longer important to the public we serve. Yet there's plenty of evidence to the contrary. An article in the most recent volume of the *Annual Review of Sociology* reviews research published over the past ten to fifteen years and addresses some common questions raised about reading. The answers are surprising.

Who reads? Just about everyone. In a normal day, a majority of people do some reading in books, magazines, and newspapers. Over half say they are reading as much as they used to; only three percent say they read less. Nine out of ten say reading is a good use of time. Reading, unlike watching television or playing games, is a prestigious activity, assumed to be socially and culturally valuable. Children aren't generally chided for spending too much time reading books.

How do we read? We read socially. We learn to read within the social frameworks of school and in the family. We read as members of collective groups - in imagined communities as well as in formal reading groups. We read what others read so that we can share the experience. We read sometimes as a means to an end, but often we read for pleasure, as an end in itself.

Is reading losing ground to other media? New technology has always had an effect on reading, but it's not always a negative effect. The growth of rail travel in the nineteenth century, for example, actually increased reading, because people brought books and newspapers along to pass the time. Television has been accused of competing with reading since its advent in the 1950s, though Michael Korda credits the introduction of television with saving book publishing in the fifties and sixties; television needed talking heads to fill air time and, for the first, time authors could talk to millions of people about their books. Time spent on the Internet does not apparently compete with reading. The heaviest Internet users are the heaviest readers. This shouldn't surprise us: not only does much Internet use involve reading, the first successful online retail venture was an online bookstore. Internet communication has also fostered sharing reading experiences: there are thousands of book groups thriving on the Internet - about which I will have more to say in a minute.

So reading isn't in such dire straights as we might think. Another common misperception is that reading is a solitary, even lonely activity. Before widespread literacy, reading was a rare

accomplishment. In early works of Western art, most readers depicted were males who were either contemplating religious texts or engaged in higher learning, generally in serious solitude. Women as readers began to show up in the arts in the 17th and 18th century, but these images were generally in a private, personal setting, distinguishing reading by women as a significantly different activity: one that was intensely interior, domestic, even at times showing reading women as idle and self-absorbed. In the twentieth century, women who read were often depicted as women who didn't have an authentic life. In the dystopic dark side of the perennial Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, a life among books is a lonely substitute for a more socially meaningful and fulfilling life as wife and mother. This image of reading as private, personal, and a poor substitute for real life has only recently been challenged as scholars examine reading as a socially mediated activity, one worthy of study.

"For the past two hundred years," according to sociologist Elizabeth Long, "reading groups have been primarily women's groups" (31) and for that reason she had trouble getting anyone to take her research seriously. When describing it to a colleague, he was mystified until he finally understood what she meant - and dismissed it, saying, "oh, my wife belongs to one of those." End of conversation. Yet nineteenth century women's reading groups had a significant social mission: they were engaged in promoting culture and in social reform, and were responsible for founding the majority of American public libraries. Today, though certainly men belong to reading groups, and entire communities, colleges, and even states choose to read books in common, reading in groups remains an activity strongly identified with women.

Reading groups gained a high profile when Oprah's Book Club was launched. For a few years a relatively obscure novel anointed by the popular talk show host would become an instant bestseller. Oprah's approach to reading was two-fold. First, she encouraged readers to tackle books that they might find difficult because reading would stretch their minds - it would be educational and enriching. But she also allowed readers to think about books in terms of their own lives, to find common ground through reading with writers and with other readers, something that is discouraged in academic approaches to reading literature that emphasize critical analysis rather than emotional responses. She also would entice readers by talking about how much she personally enjoyed the book. Some members of the literary establishment took exception to a television celebrity being so strongly identified with book culture. When Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* was chosen, he expressed reservations that his novel would be labeled with the Oprah logo. He worried it would be shunned by highbrow and male readers, if embraced by middle-class women. Thanks to his response, the influential club came to a sudden halt. Only recently has Oprah returned to choosing contemporary works for her book club. And once again, when her choices go awry they become news.

Though nobody but Oprah has a book club that reaches 22 million people, her book club is a merely a well-publicized version of an unquenchable thirst for talking about books. Book clubs are everywhere. Elizabeth Long uncovered over 100 book groups in Houston when she started researching the phenomenon, and realized later there were probably far more that she hadn't discovered. On the Internet, there are untold numbers of book discussion groups. Yahoo Groups lists over 36,000 groups in the category "books and writing;" the majority of these, of course, are not formal book discussion groups, but many of them are. And community common reading programs - begun by Nancy Pearl in the mid-1990s with "If All of Seattle Reads the Same Book" - have become commonplace.

Time for another free write prompt. Are you involved in a reading group, either face-to-face or online? Has your library been involved in a common reading experience or hosted book clubs? If not, would you like to be?

I joined an online book group focused on crime fiction in 2003 after a friend I knew through another discussion list recommended it. One of the things that intrigued me about it was that,

though I had two degrees in literature and an MLS, I was learning more about how people respond to books and what books mean to them than I ever had before. This group, aptly called "4 Mystery Addicts" (or 4MA for short) was been started by a handful of mystery fans in December of 1999 who wanted to have a more in-depth experience with books than they'd found on other e-mail discussion lists. When I joined it had around 500 members from around the globe; it now has over 750, many of whom lurk. Though the majority of posts come from residents of the US, the UK, Australia, and Canada, in the past two years there have been members from all continents save Antarctica. It's a very diverse group in terms of physical disabilities, educational attainment, income, age, gender, and sexual orientation. As one member told me, "Online book groups take you beyond color, race, religion and sex - you all love books."

The group is moderated by a team of six who play various roles in maintaining the community. It's a remarkably even-tempered group. In part, that is due to the moderators playing an active role in enforcing the rules, posting gently-worded reminders when a member slips up and forgets to edit replies, responds in an overly-confrontational manner, or veers into off-topic remarks about politics or religion. But to a large degree, the group moderates itself. Members are careful to maintain a humorous and civil tone; conflicts are rare and quickly defused. Controversial issues often surface in the discussion of a book, since social conflict and troubling ethical issues are so commonly the subject matter of crime fiction, but members generally word their comments carefully to minimize any potential to cause offense.

Though the conversation often wanders off-topic, the focus is kept on reading in several ways. When a new member joins they are asked to introduce themselves and describe their reading preferences. Members respond, often suggesting additional authors the new member might enjoy. There are three formal book discussions each month, with books nominated and voted on by the members. Two of these are led by volunteer "Question Maestros" who devises a set of questions to be posed over the course of a ten-day period. Some Question Maestros go to special lengths to enrich discussion by pointing out Web sites for background information, finding apt lyrics of songs to preface questions, or even contacting and interviewing the authors of books under discussion. A recent discussion of a Walter Mosely novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, opened with a link to a Web site that offered classic blues recordings. The book discussed in the middle of the month is for "serial readers," focusing on the first three books in a series so that readers can examining the growth in the series over time. For variety, there is a "moderator's choice" month, one devoted to "other cultures" and a "classics month" in which nominated books must have been published at least forty years ago. In the course of the discussions, members often disagree about the things they like or dislike in a book, but their disagreements aren't a source of contention. In fact, the books that provoke the widest disagreement are usually the ones that make for the most interesting discussions.

Apart from the formal book discussions, various routines keep the focus on books. In the middle of the month members report on what they're reading, and at the end of the month members post reviews of all of the books they've read that month. Every now and then members are asked for the first paragraph on a random page of the book they're currently reading. It's actually a surprisingly good reader's advisory tactic - when you scan paragraphs found on page 45 of a number of books, you usually can pick out some that you know you want to read. These formal opportunities to encounter books to try is one of the chief benefits people find in belonging to 4MA. As Catherine Sheldrick Ross has pointed out, having happy experiences choosing books is key to reading success. "Each book read contributes to the bulk of reading experience that enhances the reader's ability to choose another satisfying book. Conversely, each unsuccessful choice decreases the beginning reader's desire to read, which in turn reduces the likelihood of further learning based on interaction with books." As members pool their vast knowledge of the genre, they constitute an ongoing reader's advisory service of

great depth.

For an article that came out in *Reference and User Services Quarterly* last summer I sought permission from members to quote some of their posts, and conducted e-mail interviews of several willing members to get a deeper sense of what role the group has played in their lives. I was inspired to write about the group when a member posted a message with the subject line, "Reading as a Contact Sport." It clarified for me just how social and interactive reading is.

Reading is an **active** process for me, not something I passively do - brain engaged, heart open, willing to be stomped on or thrilled or hurt or helped, or all of the above. It perhaps explains my anger when an author disappoints or, even worse, deliberately "trifles with my emotions", promising but not delivering, manipulating for sensation only, "playing with my affections". <grin>

This member spoke of reading as a "love affair," in which the reader and writer engage in a short-term but passionate relationship: "it always takes two, and even the ultimately sad ones "grow" you in some way, as long as they touch you where it matters." And she describes its rewards:

And oh, the wonder, the joy, the almost physical satisfaction when an author unexpectedly delights you, charms you, pulls you away from the mundane and "the usual". Brings you into their world, truly welcomes you there, makes you feel a part of it, **invested** in it, as if it truly matters for you what happens to those people, that place, this occasion. THAT's writing!

The solidarity of a group of like-minded avid readers is also a source of comfort (and amusement) for this online group. Apart from exchanging tips on where to store excess books (who needs to bake? Use your oven for storage) or how to read books while weeding the garden, members support one another's passion for reading. As one Australian member joked, "Most people have stopped asking me why I need so many books (because I've taken to peering at them and asking in a very loud voice 'you mean you don't!!!!!!') but they still sigh and pointedly move stacks of books around so they can 'sit comfortably' . . . I've often contemplated banning anyone from the house who doesn't have an emergency book in the glove box of their car when they arrive."

This sense of solidarity extends beyond a shared love of reading. "People respect each other's opinions but go way beyond that and support each other," one of the moderators told me. "True friendships have bloomed. Lots of small and not so small gestures have happened - books sent to members who don't have the resources to buy some books for example . . . Over the years, this list has grown into a full blown community where the books are still the center but the people and their lives fill all the space around them."

The informational value of fiction, as well as its ability to offer opportunities for reflection, is something members are aware of. When asked what they get out of reading mysteries, entertainment and escape were often mentioned by 4MA members, but so was learning new things. "I like the way I can get lost in a good mystery and I feel like I learn something from the best of them, be it about a geographical area, or some aspect of science or technology, or just about people of different cultures or backgrounds," one member told me. Another said, "Reading has always been my saving grace. As the eldest of nine children escaping to a corner with a book was my way of coping with life in general. Even though I have always read many different types of book, from historical to romances to non-fiction history and biography, mysteries have long been my favorite genre . . . Maybe it's the psychology involved in trying to understand the villain or maybe it's escaping my problems by reading about someone else's."

One member began by pointing out she enjoys the puzzle, but added "What's kept me interested in mysteries is the constant spotlight on the human condition. Even the more gory, extreme books that I've managed to finish have provided an insight into humanity and its frailties that I just don't get with mainstream literature anymore." Though this may mean reading about uncomfortable subjects at times, that encounter can be informative. "If it makes people stop and think about issues then it's a positive thing," one member said. "I keep remembering the discussion we had on Rebecca Pawel's *Death of Nationalist* and the issues it raised about war, human nature and how nothing is black and white. I think that's probably the most interesting book discussion I've ever participated in."

I tried an experiment this past August, hoping to transfer some of what I've gotten out of this online book discussion to the college experience. On our campus, as on many, we have a "common reading," a book that incoming first year students are encouraged to read over the summer before coming to school. I got a few first term seminar teachers and their students to join me in holding an online discussion of the book chosen for this year, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. This proved to be a spectacular failure. I hoped the students would be able to get to know each other a little bit before arriving on campus and have a positive exposure to talking about books just for fun. The only problem was that none of them felt brave enough to join in. They were intimidated and thrown by the idea of talking about a book with college faculty for fun, and weren't sure what their role was. According to one of them, they were used to being given questions that they could look up in the book, questions with implied answers that the teacher knew. Though many of them read for pleasure, they couldn't connect that pleasure to an educational setting.

Another surprise for me was the different assumptions about what this common reading experience was for. Faculty assume a book discussion should focus on forming a better understanding the book by analyzing its structure, its plot, its characters and themes. The student affairs staff who initiated the program wanted the book discussion to focus almost entirely on emotional identification - to use events in the book to discuss adjustment to college, sometimes to almost comic effect. "Amir had to leave Afghanistan and start a new life in America, and his relationship with his father changed. How do you think your relationship with your parents will change now that you're in college?" In many ways this cultural practice of reading a book in common on a college campus is a fulcrum for the contested notions of literacy, and for that reason I'm observing the entire process of selecting a book and planning orientation next year to unpack some of those assumptions and disconnections.

Next year I'd like to try another online discussion format, either one led by upper class students or a public conversation that incoming students can read without feeling pressure to do more than "lurk." I'm convinced there is a role for forming a sense of community through reading together, one that could be especially valuable for incoming students; using online communication has the potential to break down students' belief that responding to books in college means finding the correct answer. Perhaps, too, it will help faculty and student affairs staff learn how analysis and intellectual engagement with books can comfortably coexist with the empathy and identification that characterize popular reading practices.

For a librarian, being a participant-observer in an active book group, whether online or face-to-face, can be an eye-opening experience. The multiple ways that readers respond to books, and the importance of books in their lives, is affirming of what we do as a profession. Elizabeth Long has put it this way:

Reading groups are centrally focused on books and ideas. They may engage issues of identity and provide validation for many different inflections of womanhood, but their primary mission, today as in the early years of the nineteenth-century literary club movement, centers on reading, the pleasures of the text, and normative

conversations that consider both books and life experience. Reading groups still serve middle-class women as time spent for self improvement, for personal fulfillment, and for exploration of personal identity, but most particularly as time for the development of a self that is engaged with the literary imagination and dedicated to the discussion of ideas, meaning, and values in the company of equally dedicated companions. (73)

To return to the beginning, when we question the public's identification of libraries with books, we are discounting, I believe, one of the most valuable and underrated services a library provides. The authors of the OCLC market research study seem to be saying essentially "when people identify books with libraries, they are missing out on the richness and importance of the information we offer." I disagree. When the public says books they are talking about information - and much more. They're talking about the personal fulfillment they gain from reading, from the ideas, meaning, and values that they find in books and in the social act of reading together.

References

Barstow, Jane Missner. "Reading in Groups: Women's Clubs and College Literature Classes." *Publishing Research Quarterly* (2003): 3-17.

Devlin-Glass, F. "More than a Reader and Less than a Critic: Literary Authority and Women's Book-Discussion Groups." *Womens Studies International Forum* 24.5 (2001): 571-85.

Dwyer, Jim. "Books are for use? Keeping the Faith in Reading." *Acquisitions Librarian*.25 (2001): 61-79.

Gerrig, Richard J. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.

Given, Lisa M., and Gloria J. Leckie. "'Sweeping' the Library: Mapping the Social Activity Space of the Public Library." *Library and Information Science Research* 25 (2003): 365-85.

Griswold, Wendy, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright. "Reading and the Reading Class in the Twenty-First Century." *Annual Review of Sociology*. Palo Alto: Annual Reviews, 2005. 127-141.

Long, Elizabeth. *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003.

Nell, Victor. *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.

OCLC. [*Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*](#). Dublin, Ohio: OCLC, 2005. <>

Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, Lynne McKechnie, and Paulette Rothbauer. *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006.

Ross, Catherine. "Finding without Seeking: What Readers Say about the Role of Pleasure Reading as a Source of Information." *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services* 13.2 (2000): 72-80.

Rehberg Sedo, DeNel. "Predications of Life After Oprah: A Glimpse at the Power of Book Club

Readers." *Publishing Research Quarterly* 18.3 (2004): 11-22.

Striphas, Ted. "A Dialectic with the Everyday: Communication and Cultural Politics on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20.3 (2003): 295-316.

Usherwood, Bob, and Jackie Toyne. "The Value and Impact of Reading Imaginative Literature." *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 34.1 (2002): 33-41.

Wiegand, Wayne. "The Politics of Cultural Authority." *American Libraries* (1998): 80-82.

Wiegand, Wayne A. "To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User." *Library Quarterly* 73.4 (2003): 369-70.