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Library Philosophy and Practice 2011

ISSN 1522-0222

Engaging Readers, Engaging Texts: An Exploration of How Librarians Can Use Reader Response Theory to Better Serve Our Patrons

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Introduction

Wolfgang Iser, in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," states, "The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written" (958). If reading is, as Iser describes it, a creative process in and of itself, which adds layers of meaning and understanding to a given work, then practitioners of a profession closely associated with books, reading, and literacy—librarianship—can use reader response theory to improve the services they offer to patrons. This paper will outline ways librarians can accomplish that task through readers' advisory, collection development, book reviewing, community reading programs, and book discussion groups.

Librarians of all people should understand the relationships that can exist between readers and books. As Iser put it, reading allows us to "formulate the unformulated" (968). Reading—and relating to—a work awakens something within us that we were never conscious of before, but which now we can at least acknowledge if not comprehend. Librarians are keenly aware of the power of reading and the impact a book can make on someone's life. Perhaps, though, the profession just has no name for that effect because librarians are generally not taught literary theory in Library and Information Science (LIS) graduate programs. The emphasis of such programs today is on technology: indexing and abstracting articles for online research databases; cataloging non-print items; utilizing metadata; understanding and teaching information literacy skills; and using web-based tools to bring libraries into the 21st century. Though LIS programs offer an occasional "History of the Book" or "History of Printing and Publishing" course, books, print culture, and literary theory are usually afterthoughts.^[1]

A decade ago, Wayne Wiegand, then a professor in the University of Wisconsin-

Madison's School of Library and Information Studies, asked, "Why don't we have any 'Schools of Library and Reading Studies'?" (1). Dr. Wiegand, who is currently the F. William Summers Professor of Library and Information Studies in the College of Communication and Information at The Florida State University, teaches courses on, among other topics, the history of reading and incorporates literary theory—particularly reader response theory—into his classes. At the point in the semester when Wiegand introduces the works of Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Stanley Fish to his students, he is usually met by blank stares (2). Often the majority of students pursuing graduate degrees in Library Science have completed undergraduate studies in the humanities, yet they have never been exposed to the theoretical underpinnings of reading scholarship. Wiegand finds this matter to be deplorable. However, he is not alone in his mission to educate LIS students about reading scholarship.

Catherine Ross, former Dean of Information and Media Studies at Western Ontario University, has engaged in reading theory research for much of her career and taught countless LIS students about the reasons why people read. Ross is curious about how readers "distinguish between fiction and nonfiction" (105), as well as why some readers prefer fiction to nonfiction and vice versa. While conducting hundreds of interviews with readers (who were selected for the study precisely because they love to read), Dr. Ross and her research assistants posed many questions, including: "How do you choose a book to read for pleasure? Are there types of books that you do not enjoy and would not choose? What are you currently reading? Has there even been a book that has made a big difference to your life in one way or another?" (106). Like Wiegand, Ross uses reader response theory in constructing her arguments about reading scholarship, but she frames her findings exclusively within the context of readers' advisory service.^[2]

Dr. Ross drew several conclusions about her subjects' choice of reading materials. She found that readers enjoy both fiction and nonfiction and "an interest in a particular subject can trump the distinction between [the genres]" (107). People who read nonfiction exclusively do so because they "want to read about things that are 'real'" (108). Some readers indicated that the length of time they have to devote to reading influences their choice in reading material. If they have short periods of time in which to read, they select nonfiction titles, which can be read in short sections or in non-sequential order (Ross 109-110). Some respondents feel they "'should' read nonfiction to increase their knowledge" (Ross 110).

Ross also found that readers distinguish between pleasure reading and reading to "take something away" (111). This led her to draw upon Louise Rosenblatt's distinction between efferent reading and aesthetic reading, which Ross addresses:

Efferent readers read to find some particular information or fact that they can transfer from the reading situation and use in their everyday lives. Or readers can choose to see the text as primarily 'poetic,' in which case they take an aesthetic stance. In aesthetic reading, the important thing is not the message that can be extracted but the reader's lived-through and immediate experience of encountering the text (111).

This is the one instance in a lengthy book chapter that Dr. Ross refers to reader response theory (and, specifically, the phenomenological approach), but it is clear that reception theory underlies, and can help explain, many of her findings.

Ross's next conclusion is one for librarians to take to heart: "The stance taken by the reader is not determined by the text" (112). In other words, library classification schemes (such as the Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal System, for example), depend "on the assumption that certain basic differences inhere in the texts themselves and that these differences map on to how people actually use books" (112). However, Ross found, for example, that some of her subjects reported reading encyclopedias for fun when they were kids and that kind of book was a source they still enjoyed. Are those people best served by finding a favorite kind of text in a non-circulating reference collection? No. Such people may find

that a "passion for a single topic is the impetus for reading" (114), so librarians should find ways to better serve them. Ross also learned "sometimes readers don't want to do something; they just want to read about it" (114) and that "part of the joy of reading is serendipitous discovery" (115). In short, some of Ross's findings may seem obvious, but nevertheless, the more reading scholarship librarians can see in black and white, the better informed we will be.

Before faculty members and administrators make additional changes in library and information science curricula regarding reading scholarship, we should further examine how librarians can use reading theory to improve the professional services we offer. Though now sometimes considered a throwback to the days of the stereotypical, bookish, old-maid librarian with glasses perched atop her bun, readers' advisory service is still an expectation many library patrons have notably of public librarians, but they seek academic librarians' advice on books, too.

"I've just finished the *Left Behind* series. What should I read next?" Or, "I love Anita Shreve's books. Who else writes novels like that?" Though those may be questions that academic librarians do not receive as often as their public counterparts, there is no reason why we should not have a basic understanding of reception theory (the phrase Wiegand uses to refer to Iser's work) to offer improved services and new programs to patrons. In recent years, academic librarians around the country have begun working closely with public librarians, teachers, and bookstore employees to coordinate community reading programs. Libraries of all kinds host readings, book clubs, and other literary-themed events in order to promote the library as place—reminding people other than heavy library users that even in our current Information Age, the library (and, by extension, the book) is still relevant.

In selecting texts to promote or writers to host, librarians can, as Iser described it, help readers to formulate the unformulated and expose them to new thoughts, ideas, and emotions. In their own way, all librarians can, in our increasingly multicultural and multinational society, help promote better understanding between people of diverse backgrounds. The question is where do they begin? Before attempting to answer that question, I will examine reader response—or reception—theory more closely.

Louise Rosenblatt, the literary critic whose seminal 1938 text, *Literature as Exploration*, opened up a new avenue into literary theory, served as a precursor to Wolfgang Iser and his contemporaries. Rosenblatt, in the fifth edition of her book, wrote:

A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings (24).

By infusing meaning into symbols, the reader, in other words, plays a part in the creation of a text. Rosenblatt's premise was later referenced by Iser in his notion of re-creation being what readers do as they read: they play out books in their heads.

Rosenblatt explores what readers bring to literature largely within the context of the teacher-student relationship. While she raises many interesting points about reading in general, Rosenblatt remains focused on what students bring to literature and how teachers can help their pupils "understand a work of literature as a whole [which] involves the context of the student's past experience as well as the historical, social, and ethical context into which he must fit the particular work" (107). Obviously, Rosenblatt was not solely interested in the phenomenology of reading, but she did seek to elevate the importance of reader response in approaching and discussing literature. Rosenblatt, though focusing mainly on youthful readers, also emphasizes the role literature plays "in the process through

which the individual becomes assimilated into the cultural pattern" (179). As public servants, librarians, in particular, should have a thorough understanding of Rosenblatt's assertion precisely because of the community outreach work we do and even the social activism in which some of us engage.

Iser and Rosenblatt, of course, are not the only critics who have written extensively about reader response theory. Georges Poulet wrote of an "interior distance" within readers: "For all that I think is in myself who think it...Thus there is revealed another aspect of literature, a hidden aspect, the invisible face of the moon" (vii-viii). In other words, what readers think of as they read is an unknown variable (to writers), but one that certainly contributes to their understanding of the works they read.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in writing and speaking about the theater, noted, "The audience writes the play quite as much as the author does" (68). That sentiment somewhat echoes what Rosenblatt noted about reading plays; however, Sartre addressed the live audience watching a play and how the members' reactions to each performance can change "its meaning...from day to day" (139). Sartre's assertion can be applied to public readings and discussions of books, as well as book group meetings. A reader's comprehension of a text (not to mention his assignation of meaning to the work) can be affected by hearing other readers' interpretations of the same material.

Once librarians have a basic understanding of reader response (or reception) theory, they can begin applying it to the work they do. A key responsibility for many librarians is providing reader's advisory service both formally through library sponsored book clubs and reading programs and informally at the reference desk. In fact, Dilevko and Magowan note that every public library in North America offers a readers' advisory service (3). However, there is a dearth of literature on readers' advisory services in academic libraries (Smith and Young 521).[\[3\]](#)

Fortunately, librarians have a variety of tools at their disposal to use in offering readers advice on books: book reviews, *Who's Who* books in the arts, the *Contemporary Authors* series, and online databases to name a few. Many librarians have tackled the subject of readers' advisory service in the professional literature by offering tips on how to do it and outlining training advice to their peers (Morgan 54; Wilson 26). Some freely admit their fears of offering patrons advice on what to read next and how they overcame it (Brannon 19); while others tackle offering readers advisory services to the next generation of library users, children (Smith 18). In outlining strategies for leading successful book discussion groups, one librarian also offered tips that are helpful for providing readers' advisory services (Evans 347).

Despite the number of readers' advisory resources at librarians' disposal, there is little understanding in the profession about how these tools are created in the first place. With so few librarians aware of the theoretical underpinnings of reading scholarship and literary theory, these issues should be explored more in the professional library literature than they have been to date.

Do-it-yourself readers' advisory service is becoming more prevalent—even if the public is not aware of the name for resources like *Books & Authors* and *whichbook.net*, which are just two of numerous online databases that feature book synopses and reader recommendations. Such tools are based in part on reader response theory because they allow users to select titles by how they feel and how they want to be engaged by, or with, books.

Whichbook.net allows users to select books by sliding scales between two opposing characteristics in four of twelve categories. For instance, readers can slide a scale between "sex" and "no sex" depending upon their preference for chastity or graphic sex scenes or anything in between. Other dichotomous pairs of characteristics, which readers can select in varying degrees, include "expected/unpredictable," "easy/demanding," "optimistic/bleak," and

"safe/disturbing." Once qualities are selected, the database returns matches that are ranked as "Best," "Good," or "Fair" (though the site lacks rationale for these rankings). For each title on the list, there is a reader comment, a brief extract from the book in question, and parallels—or other similar books to consider.^[4]

Moving beyond mood alone in selecting books, *whichbook.net* also allows users to select books by characters' race, age, gender, and sexuality, the type of story presented—from "quest" to "success against the odds", and the setting, which can be anyplace in the world. Granted, not all searches will yield results, but allowing users to search for new titles by so many variables certainly raises expectations—and perhaps unfairly so because users may assume that whatever their interests are, they will receive a long list of suggested titles. (Despite the hours of programming that go into their creation, web-based readers advisory tools can never really take the place of two humans discussing books they like. Presumably, that is something most librarians would agree upon even though they choose to make online readers' advisory tools available to their patrons.)

How do the developers of *whichbook.net* define their product? According to the website's Frequently Asked Questions (or FAQs), the database creators view their resource as starting with the reader, and enabling each person "to build the elements of that elusive 'good read' we are all looking for but don't quite know how to define" (*whichbook.net* FAQ number 1). Rather than start the reading process by staring at rows of books the way they are organized by author, title, or genre on library or bookstore shelves, *whichbook.net* allows readers to hone in on precisely the kind of book they want to read on a given day.

Interestingly, *whichbook.net* was created and is maintained by Opening the Book Limited, a company that considers itself the founder of the reader development movement in the United Kingdom and a creator of reader-centered approaches in promoting literature. According to another of the website's FAQs public librarians, appropriately enough:

... have played a key role in creating data for whichbook, in testing the site with large numbers of users and in promoting it through their extensive networks of services in the community. Library staff in England, Wales, and Scotland have contributed to whichbook as part of larger training programmes in reader development (*whichbook.net* FAQ number 3).

Raising the issue of reader development here is crucial because that is the lifeblood of libraries—especially public ones. Sponsoring children's reading programs and providing readers' advisory service to adults, while not the only *raison d'être* for libraries, are certainly two critical functions of such institutions. *Whichbook.net* is just one of many readers' advisory tools at librarians' (and the public's) disposal. Other institutions have also jumped onto the high-tech readers' advisory bandwagon.

Through the Michigan e-Library, Central Michigan University students, staff, and faculty have access to *Books & Authors*, a proprietary database from Gale Cengage Learning. Described as "a database to help you decide what to read next (*Books & Authors* allows users to) search by character, topic, setting, time period, genre, title, author, and series" (*Books & Authors* homepage). The database includes records for both fiction and non-fiction genres with more than 140,000 titles by 50,000 authors. Special lists of books featured in the database include Expert Picks, Award Winners, and Librarians' Favorites.

If reading is worth doing because it is pleasurable and (potentially) educational, then what effect will "pre-selecting" reading experiences have on readers? How high will their expectations of the book be? Will their expectations of books recommended by human—or computer—resources be raised so high that anything less than an outstanding read will be a disappointment? Teenage girls may want to read realistic fiction with no-so-happy or neatly resolved endings, but librarians

have found that adults do want happy endings (Evans 347). Library users expect librarians to know everything—including which books they will like. In academic libraries, it is not entirely unusual for students to ask librarians for book recommendations for pleasure reading—especially as semester breaks near (Smith and Young 522).^[5] However, the popular stereotype of librarians knowing all there is about books remains a big hurdle for the profession and serves to underscore the reasons why *whichbook.net*, *Books & Authors*, and other such readers' advisory tools are created in the first place: there is a demand for them in libraries of all kinds.

Thinking critically about readers' advisory and the resources that can be used to provide effective service to readers benefits all librarians, so how can we use reader response theory to promote reading beyond just the typical readers' advisory service? For starters, an understanding of reader response theory can help inform librarians' purchase decisions since collection development is a core responsibility for most librarians at some point in our careers. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature on how this can be accomplished. In the Library Literature database, there is one record for an article on how librarians might be able to use reader response theory in collection development and program planning. Kay Vandergriff, a children's librarian, has an excellent understanding of reader response theory and even makes a very good point about the role readers play in deriving meaning from text:

All readers or viewers are producers as well as consumers of meaning. I don't think we give children enough credit for that. We tend to treat literature as if the meaning is within, so that "perfectly informed readers," as the critics tend to say, will get the appropriate meaning from a text. And if they do not get the meaning that somebody else says is there, then they are imperfect readers. (59)

Vandergriff confuses literacy with reception theory to a certain degree, but, unfortunately, she never truly extrapolates how collection development is—or can be—influenced by reader response theory. One possibility she mentions only briefly is buying books similar in genre or subject to those that most widely circulate in the library's collection. The main point of her article remains that if librarians understand their patrons and the relationships those patrons have with certain books then the collection can be developed to appeal to those who use it the most.

A very recent example of genre-derived collection development stems from the popular reception of the late Steig Larsson's bestselling "Millennium Trilogy," which is about a brilliant and socially awkward computer hacker who joins forces with a hard-nosed journalist to solve a series of crimes. The worldwide success of the series has led publishers, booksellers, and libraries scrambling to find the next big hit among Nordic writers. It turns out that Scandinavian crime novels have been popular with serious mystery readers for a long time, but even best-selling authors are little known in this country. As Julie Bosman notes, "If there is a formula to the genre, it often includes a cold, stark setting and a grizzled detective figure who consumes too much coffee and junk food" (¶6). Furthermore, Bosman writes, "Scandinavian writers who have had small but devoted followings are now seeing their books showcased alongside Mr. Larsson's extraordinarily popular series" (¶8). Librarians who add such titles to their collections will be following Vandergriff's two-decades-old advice.

How can reader response theory be used in other ways to build library collections? In other words, how can libraries give readers what they want and not what they (librarians) think readers should have (like canonical works, for example)? Beyond the obvious answer of providing enough circulating copies of best-sellers, or books currently being read in library sponsored book clubs, librarians should consider the demographics of their constituents—how old their users are, their nationalities or ethnic backgrounds, their proficiency in English and other languages. Good collection development managers already take these matters into consideration when adding to and weeding collections. But what else can be done? Following

community trends and developments—such as immigration, legal issues, and land use matters—librarians can purchase relevant materials for their collections. Librarians can also purchase new texts that have been suggested by patrons.

More subtly, librarians could possibly influence readers to explore the "other" in their reading choices, by adding to the collection books about people who differ from that of the typical library user by age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. However, I do not advocate adding controversial materials to library collections unless such items are related to the needs and interests of patrons.^[6] Librarians are good judges of who their patrons are, and by developing close ties to the members of the communities they serve, librarians can begin to open up a world of possibilities for their users.

A major drawback to purchasing new materials of any kind is ever-tightening budgets in libraries—public and academic alike. Smith and Young note, "Emphasizing what is already on the shelves rather than buying a great deal of new genre fiction is a good way to deal with the potential expense of expanding offerings for pleasure reading in academic libraries, expense being a major stumbling block to such efforts" (522). Pointing patrons to what the library already owns is marvelous, of course, but it also serves another purpose. For example, if someone who loves romance novels can browse a specific area of the library to find more such books, then she may be satisfied with her library experience and return. If patrons see library collections as genre-based and many different kinds of literature are available, that gets librarians "away from granting some forms of writing's inherent superiority to others" (Smith and Young 522). In other words, collection development is not and should not be all about the literary canon.

In addition to purchasing materials, many librarians also write book reviews for a wide variety of publications, including *Booklist*, *Choice*, *American Libraries*, and disciplinary journals in their areas of specialty. While reviewing books^[7] is not usually a primary job responsibility for librarians, it is appropriate for us to provide critical commentary on the very materials that end up in our libraries' collections. For academic librarians who are appointed as tenure-track faculty members, publishing book reviews counts as minor accomplishments toward earning reappointment and tenure.

When reviewing a book, one examines the scope of the work, its appropriateness for its target audience, and whether or not it is a worthy addition to a collection. A reviewer can also address the book's possible impact on the reader and the reader's knowledge base. Because reader response theory illustrates the ways readers interact with texts, a basic understanding of it could be beneficial for librarians who write, or plan to write, book reviews. However, because there are so many different branches—or approaches—to reader response theory, it is necessary to highlight those approaches briefly before considering the practical ways in which applying some might help book reviewers with their tasks.

John Lye, a former English professor who is now the Associate Dean, Student Affairs and Curriculum, at Brock University in Canada, explains what he sees as six different approaches to reader response theory on a webpage for a course he formerly taught. His various approaches are briefly described here:

- Psychoanalytic view – The reader responds to the core fantasies and the symbolic groundwork of the text in a highly personal way.
- Hermeneutic view – ...The reader can only approach the text with her own foreunderstanding, which is grounded in history. However as the text is similarly grounded in history, and as often there is much in the histories that is shared and well as what is not, there is both identity and strangeness.
- Phenomenological view – The text functions as a set of instructions for its own processing, but is as well indeterminate, needs to be completed, to be concretized.
- Structural view – Decoding the text requires various levels of competence ... as the work is constructed according to sets of conventions, which have

their basis in an objective, socially shared reality. The 'meaning' then depends largely on the competence of the reader in responding to the structures and practices of the text and which operate implicitly.

- Political or ideological view – ...As a text is produced in a certain social and material milieu it cannot not have embedded ideological assumptions. The reader herself will have ideological convictions and understandings as well, often unrecognized, as is the nature of ideology. Those understandings will condition and direct the reading and the application of the reading.
- Post-structural view – Meaning is indeterminate, is not 'in' the text but in the play of language and the nuances of conventions in which the reader is immersed: hence the reader constructs a text as she participates in this play, driven by the instabilities and meaning potentials of the semantic and rhetorical aspects of the text. (¶ 2-6, 8)

Lye's application of different branches of literary criticism to reader response theory suggests that some approaches described above may be more relevant than others in terms of the consideration they receive—or should receive—from book reviewers.

If a book reviewer is concerned about the social or political ideologies espoused in a book, he must still present and critique it as a product of its time while acknowledging (at least tangentially) that readers may have entirely different perspectives of the work based upon their own ideological convictions. For example, in my review of the biography *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, for *Ohioana Quarterly*, I noted that, "Jack Johnson, with his hard living and womanizing ways, courted no more scandals outside of the boxing ring than his white counterparts; however, for living his life as he saw fit, he paid a heavy price. The press ridiculed Johnson, publicizing his transgressions with relentless ferocity and using language that to our modern sensibilities is quite shocking" (Mathson 333). In other words, as the first African-American world heavyweight boxing champion, Johnson (who won the title in 1908) was subjected to pejorative name-calling by newspaper reporters and other writers of the day. I was disturbed and even shocked by the prejudicial one-hundred year old press clippings that were reproduced in the pages of the biography. It is easy to imagine that the harsh language in them could affect other readers in similar ways.

Writing a book review utilizing the structuralist approach to reader response theory is quite different from using the political ideology view. If a reviewer is writing for a concerned audience, such as other members of his profession, then he can utilize conventions, language, and concepts commonly known by members of that group. For example, in an academic book review that will be published in a higher education journal, a reviewer is free to use the jargon of the profession, as well as assume a certain degree of common knowledge among the readers. The reviewer can also explicitly address whether a book is too broad or too narrow in scope for a particular group of readers as I did when reviewing *Outreach Services in Academic and Special Libraries* for the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*:

...[this book]is a highly specialized resource and non-librarians may find it too narrowly focused on the profession to be useful across a broad range of disciplines. For instance, one article in the volume tackles the issue of recruitment of future librarians through the development of Fellows programs. That would be useful information for college and/or career advisors to know, but it would be irrelevant to most faculty members. (Mathson 795)

In the review, I assessed the value and relevance of the book for readers working in higher education because I understand the natures of their professions and how they might possibly use and respond to the source in question.

The previous two examples are mere interpretations of Lye's critical approaches to reader response theory. Clearly, the other schools of criticism that he addresses

can be also be applied to book reviewing; doing so possibly warrants exploration in another paper.

In addition to utilizing reader response theory to review books, librarians can also apply it to other professional activities in which they engage, including coordinating community reading programs. Since the late 1990s, many libraries around the U.S. have sponsored (or co-sponsored) these annual programs. The trend began in Seattle with librarian and best-selling author Nancy Pearl's establishment of a "One Book, One Community" program in which a committee comprised of librarians, teachers, city representatives, and other individuals chose one book for the community to read in a given period of time and then come together in groups large and small to discuss the text (Watkins 55). Related events such as exhibits, concerts, and presentations by the author whose work is selected for the program are planned to correspond with the reading and discussion of the book.

East Lansing, Michigan, has hosted annual "One Book, One Community" programs since 2002. The programs are jointly sponsored and planned by the city commission, the East Lansing Public Library, and various departments at Michigan State University, including the Office of the Provost and the Honors College. Librarians at both the East Lansing Public Library and MSU Main Library have been involved each year in selecting the books, planning related activities, and, most importantly, leading community discussion groups.

How can knowledge of reader response theory be used by librarians to facilitate great discussion groups? If they know Iser's notion of recreation, librarians can ask readers how they played out the books in their heads as they read. Recreation is driven by allusions to social and historical contexts as well as playing off the unfamiliar against the familiar of our own experiences. In 2004, for example, the "One Book, One Community" program selection was James McBride's memoir, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1996). For readers who were not Black or male or Jewish (as McBride's mother was), recreating the text might have been difficult. However, if readers were aware of, or familiar with, the Civil Rights movement or New York life in the 1970s, they could easily engage themselves with McBride's book. On the other hand, if readers simply possessed good imaginations or empathy, they might be able to McBride's text as they read. Being aware of the multitude of ways readers can experience a given text can only help librarians or other book discussion leaders. Moderators should also keep in mind that each discussion will be different from every other one because the readers will be different, which reflects Sartre's ideas on how audience members' reactions can change the meaning of a play during each performance.

Librarians in Mt. Pleasant, Clare, and Harrison, launched a community reading program entitled "Mid-Michigan Reads" in 2005. The original planning committee selected Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) as the first title to read and special events were held throughout the early months of 2006, including a visit to Central Michigan University's Park Library by Bradbury biographer Sam Weller, who arranged for a phone call to Mr. Bradbury during his presentation. Audience members were able to ask Mr. Bradbury a number of questions during the event; the opportunity for readers to engage not just with a text, but also with the author, thrilled everyone involved (Mathson, Sabo, and Salisbury 82). Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America* (2001) was the "Mid-Michigan Reads" book in 2007, which was, unfortunately, the last year for the program.

While community reading programs may come and go, book discussion groups are alive and well in our Information Age and, appropriately enough, many libraries host these activities. Once again the professional literature comes to the rescue with many seasoned book discussion leaders offering advice to their peers on how to lead effective books groups (Dunn 7; Robertson 7). Elizabeth Long, Chair of the Sociology Department at Rice University, has studied a variety of reading groups in the greater Houston area for a number of years. The groups she has observed and whose members she has occasionally interviewed have different origins and core members, but interestingly, most meet in libraries or bookstores. In her

research, Long has concentrated on how groups pick which books to read. She uses the phrase "cultural authorities" to describe those sources book club members turn to in making the decisions about what they read: book reviews, university professors, and librarians. Long notes, "Whatever the method, members make use of cultural authority during the process of book selection for two major reasons: to legitimate choices and to predict the outcome of their reading experience" (17). Interestingly enough, seeking outside advice on what to read in order to ensure a good reading experience is much like what patrons do when they seek out a librarian at a reference desk or turn to an online resource such as *Books & Authors*.

A real-world example of Long's findings is reflected in the experiences of a dear friend of mine, who co-founded a reading group with church friends in 2003. The group's objective was to read one book per month and then meet in someone's home for snacks and discussion. The members of this informal group originally allowed each month's hostess to pick the book to read for that month. When some members complained they did not want the responsibility of selecting books anymore, my friend suggested that the group read the classics; in other words, they should read the most highly regarded books of the ages as noted on countless critics' lists. All of the group members were much happier reading what they think of as quality novels or, in other words, those books that are recommended by Long's so-called cultural authorities.

Such a pragmatic take on creating reading lists for book discussion groups is similar to what librarians typically do. However, librarians tend to view choosing books as a democratic process in which everyone can take part and though not all readers may agree with every selection, they are afforded a valuable opportunity to move outside their comfort zones and experience something new. As Wood explains, "As our public and political discourse becomes more heated and divisive, it's encouraging that book groups have been gaining popularity as a forum where we can still agree to disagree and gather regularly to express our opinions, explore ideas and address the issues that matter to us" (35). That view of reading groups and their functions within the larger society without a doubt gets right to the heart of reader response theory.

For ideas on using reception theory to elicit responses from the readers with whom they meet, librarians can draw upon David Bleich's work on subjective criticism as applied through reader response theory. Though written largely for teachers, Bleich's work focuses on affect and association; to get students to perform the latter, teachers should ask them for anecdotes about their own lives in relation to what they have read in a particular book so that they may open up about their thoughts and feelings (11-12). Librarians can certainly do the same when leading book discussion groups.

Librarians encourage patrons of all backgrounds to read, and, furthermore, nurture love of reading. At the end of the day, however they accomplish this, whether it is in providing readers' advisory services, overseeing collection development, writing book reviews, or sponsoring and facilitating reading groups, understanding how readers engage with texts and recreate in their minds what they read will benefit librarians and readers alike.

This paper highlights a few key ways reception theory can be applied to some of the major professional activities in which librarians engage. However, while some librarians and LIS faculty members have long been interested in reading theory and are now applying reader response theory to readers' advisory service, further research into the impact of reader response theory on collection development is clearly needed. Additional research on how reader response theory can be incorporated into book reviewing and community reading programming can also benefit librarians and readers alike. The possibilities are limitless.

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[1] One notable exception to this is the University of Western Ontario LIS course, "Reading Theory and Practice."

[2] Readers' advisory is a service that involves suggesting book titles to a reader through direct or indirect means. Librarians can provide this service directly during a reference desk transaction or an informal conversation. Indirect readers' advisory may include promoting books via a library website or newsletter.

[3] Given my own professional experience, I can add that academic librarians act as readers' advisors, too, but not as frequently as our public counterparts do.

[4] *Whichbook.net* is a British database hence the word choices of "extract" and "parallels." Ironically, a majority of the books listed in it are by American writers.

[5] This has happened to me several times, though not enough to make me feel comfortable acting as a reading advisor.

[6] To do otherwise could openly invite challenges from a litigation-happy public.

[7] In addition to reviewing books, librarians also analyze audio-visual materials. Reader response theory, however, does not apply to such items.