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Truver, Christina, "The Past Influences the Present: RA Practices in 1920-1930 and Today" (2021). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 6755.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/6755>

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14 December 2021

The Past Influences the Present: RA Practices in 1920-1930 and Today

The history of readers' advisory in the public library is both valuable and contended. Focusing on the specific period of 1920-1930 allows for an in-depth examination of what exactly readers' advisory aimed to do, how librarians implemented it, and how this affects our understanding of readers' advisory services today in the modern public library. The general consensus posits readers' advisory as a service to influence and elevate readers' tastes and education during the 1920s-1930s. This elitist attitude is looked upon with disdain today as readers' advisory has supposedly evolved into being about the readers' preferences and tastes without coercion or cajoling by the librarian in order to have them read something "better". As the years have gone by, looking back on the history of readers' advisory, especially during this important time period, helps illuminate similarities and marked differences to readers' advisory today.

Readers' advisory in the 1920s was aimed at furthering the education of patrons. This isn't inherently wrong by any means but "...they unequivocally privileged the education-bound and purposeful reading of serious literature" (Dali 27). With the good intention of "elevating public tastes, self-education, and adult learning" (Dali 26) readers' advisory could be seen as catering and favoring those who were on this journey of education and/or were already well-educated. This meant that "...nonfiction was privileged in reader services and reading with a purpose was a guiding principle of advisory work" (Dali, Vannier, & Douglass 262). With the constant repetition of education, purposeful, and guiding, a picture is created of the earnest librarian eager to point ignorant readers on the path to knowledge and fulfillment. The way

librarians conducted readers' advisory interviews during this time was pioneered by Jennie Maas Flexner, described as the "patron saint of readers' advisory" by Stephanie Anderson. Flexner emphasized furthering education both for those with extensive opportunities for learning and those with none. She was active in the New York Public Library creating the programs that were common for readers' advisors during the 1920-1930s. (Anderson 1). This active championing of education for all patrons contradicts Dali's earlier statement about librarians favoring the well-educated. Readers' advisory was treated as an advising service where entire annotated bibliographies were created after an intensive interview with a patron. Any patron was welcome. Patrons were then supposed to follow the course, checking out the books suggested, and an exit interview of sorts was conducted to make sure the program went well and they learned what they wanted to (Luyt 451). These programs are reminiscent of modern day school assignments, a definitive link to education! Readers' advisory services and these programs are better understood in the context of history.

Situating readers' advisory within the historical and cultural time period, World War 1 had ended and a season of both economic upswings and then devastating downswings were afoot. For Brendan Luyt, readers advisory and this time period are best understood when taking capitalism and consumerism into account. He argues that, "The rise of the readers' advisory in the 1920s reflects the fact that the library was and still is embedded within a particular kind of capitalist society" (Luyt 464) which seems redundant and clear given the United States exists within a capitalist system, yet Luyt takes this further. For him, readers' advisory was a means of advancing capitalism, "...the goals of the [RA] service reflected the search for a means to discipline labor and acclimatize it to new norms of social consumption" (Luyt 446). The tension between wealthy bosses and toiling laborers meant some control needed to be exercised to both

push the average American to live life to the fullest outside of work and engage in the capitalist market system they are making thrive. The way to do this was to point Americans towards active learning and engaging in various hobbies being pushed through books on wellness, active lifestyles, education, etc.

Further examination of the time period shows the partnership of Carnegie Corporation with libraries and the creation of the “Reading with a Purpose” program by the ALA which sheds more light on readers’ advisory at the time. The Carnegie Corporation of New York funded over 2,500 libraries around the world, supporting them monetarily and structurally (Carnegie Corporation, 1). With Carnegie’s emphasis on knowledge and education, these values were built into the foundations of the many libraries that were planted by the corporation. It’s no wonder readers’ advisors held education in high esteem for their patrons. Carnegie also had a hand in the “Reading with a Purpose” program piloted by the American Library Association (ALA). Crowley describes the program, “This was an extended effort commissioning, publishing, and disseminating a series of bibliographical essays or “reading courses”” (Crowley 39) which helped guide people through recommended fiction and nonfiction books on various topics like the sciences, arts, philosophy, etc. Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold and reverberations of these bibliographic essays have influenced practices today. They “still retain their value in the twenty-first century” (Crowley 39) through online and printed book lists created by the New York Times, BookPage, Goodreads, Amazon, etc. Although these modern lists are oftentimes based upon popularity (though not always), the “Reading with a Purpose” program paved the way for services such as these. At the time, it was clear these essays were created with the intent on furthering the education of its buyers. Both this program and the connection of libraries with the Carnegie Corporation demonstrate an emphasis and importance in education. This places the

readers' advisory service at the time in a mindset that prioritizes and values the public's education. All these factors collectively illustrate that readers' advisory was bound to be education focused during this time period.

There are many interpretations of the readers' advisory services in this time period. The bulk of librarians and researchers today have strong feelings of disdain and negativity for the elitism present. Luyt remarks that, "Not as much attention is paid to the initial surge in readers' advisory services in the 1920s and 1930s" (Luyt, 444). This could be in part because there are those strong feelings associated with this period of readers' advisory history because it seemingly doesn't line up to RA goals today. Kimberly Hirsh has strong words for readers' advisory during this time in her YouTube video; transcribed it reads, "It was didactic...librarians were trying to achieve a specific aim of moving readers towards being more educated...these were judgments they were making about which texts were the right texts, or the good texts, or high quality texts" (Hirsh 1). When talking about current readers' advisory she speaks in a more positive light, while continuing to negate the RA of the past, "But modern readers' advisory is about supporting their recreational reading; they may choose for that leisure reading to read informational texts, nonfiction, that would help them learn. But that's their choice. It's not that the librarian is trying to impose that on them. Readers advisory is non-judgmental" (Hirsh 1). On the other hand, MacPhee writes, "...readers' advisory groups, and libraries in general, have moved from being a source of continuing education and providers of quality, intellectually enriching books for adults to becoming primarily a promoter of entertainment or 'edutainment'" (MacPhee 196) which shows a different sentiment of past readers' advisors imparting knowledge and intellect while today's RA is pandering to a "star-studded" society of popularity contests. Clearly, opinions about the past services and purposes of readers' advisory are contested and

differ between researchers. Another researcher, Emily Lawrence remarked playfully that, “The old RA, with its musty elitism and taste-based cultural coercion, was something of a distant memory” (Lawrence 493). She truly believes the exact opposite; RA then and RA now still come from the same concept and motivation - to elevate tastes and educate people.

Looking at the origins and evolution of readers’ advisory services impacts the understanding of today’s services and motivations...it may not be as different as we think. If elevating tastes and educating people were the core ideals of readers’ advisory in the 1920s-1930s and if now the core ideal of readers’ advisory is finding reading materials that a patron wants or needs, regardless of whether these materials are considered educational, the bottom line is that reading as a pastime is still stressed. Lawrence concurs, “While *Genre* reflects portrays the service as distinctly opposed to taste elevation, RA remains fundamentally normative and, further, inescapably concerned with the improvement of individuals’ tastes. This is because...RA is essentially a project devoted to taste elevation in leisure activities” (Lawrence 493). While readers’ advisory is still aimed at creating and cultivating reading, it is a form of elitism that elevates reading over other pastimes. Looking from modern day to the past, the New York Public Library wrote a small report on Jennie Maas Flexner and her contribution in the 1920s to readers’ advisory. Their words don’t show the “elitist” attitude that was supposedly present, “She believed libraries could best serve patrons and promote reading by encouraging people to read what they like, not what they were told to” (NY Public Library, 1). Both Lawrence and NY Public Library’s statements blur the lines between 1920s RA being bad, elitist, and outdated versus current RA being progressive, accepting, and good.

Readers’ advisory in the 1920s to 1930s emphasized and valued education, helping patrons with their goals and guiding them towards more enlightenment and knowledge. Rather

than seeing the “musty elitism” in this sentiment, perhaps focusing on how there are still similarities in current readers’ advisory practices like bibliographies of book recommendations and emphasis of pleasure reading as a valuable pastime, the past can be examined with a clear lens. Looking back on the history of readers’ advisory helps illuminate practices, services, and beliefs that have changed or stayed the same across time.

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