
Is Contemporary Readers' Advisory Populist? Taste Elevation and Ideological Tension in the *Genreflecting* Series

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ABSTRACT

Is contemporary Reader's Advisory (RA) a purely populist service? In an effort to answer that question, this paper begins with a brief account of the ideological tension between populism and elitism in the library profession. It then continues to an exploration of the views on "taste elevation" represented in seven editions of the flagship *Genreflecting* series, published between 1982 and 2013. On the basis of this critical interpretive work, the paper concludes that the most plausible answer to its initial question is "no." While *Genreflecting* portrays RA as distinctly opposed to taste elevation, the service remains fundamentally normative, and further, inescapably concerned with the improvement of individuals' tastes. This is because while advisors do not try to elevate readers' tastes in books or genres, they do seek to cultivate in patrons a preference for pleasure reading. Insofar as RA is structured to instill such a preference, and insofar as *to prefer* is always *to prefer one thing over some alternative*, RA is essentially a project devoted to taste elevation in leisure activities.

INTRODUCTION

Betty Rosenberg's (1982, p. 5) famous First Law of Reading is to "never apologize for your reading tastes," and it is printed somewhere in each of the seven editions of the flagship *Genreflecting* series. Initially authored by Rosenberg, who was a librarian and UCLA lecturer, *Genreflecting* helped spark a Readers' Advisory (RA) revival (Dali, 2010, p. 214; Ross, 2009, p. 634). Each subsequent edition in the *Genreflecting* series endorsed Rosenberg's First Law, reinforcing its status as a central political imperative of the new RA and positioning the contemporary service in stark contrast with its earlier instantiation.

LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2017 ("Spanning the Information Sciences: A Celebration Marking Seventy Years of the Doctoral Program in the School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign," edited by Alistair Black and Emily J. M. Knox), pp. 491-507. © 2017 The Board of Trustees, University of Illinois

The beginning of RA as a distinct library service is usually dated to the 1920s (Crowley, 2005; Herald, 2006; Ross, 2006a; Saricks, 2005). This was the decade during which offices devoted specifically to RA first appeared in large public libraries, at a time when institutions sought “to fill a social need for public education in the postwar years” (Ross, 2006a, p. 210). Readers’ advisors of the 1920s and 1930s directed patrons toward “serious” reading by conducting RA interviews (during which they appraised the reader and their purposes) and producing customized bibliographies (Martin, 1998, p. 52; Wiegand, 2015, p. 115). From 1925 to 1933 the American Library Association (ALA) even published a series of sixty-eight topical reading courses to supplement local RA services; these included introductions and recommended readings on a wide range of subjects, including philosophy, the physical sciences, capital and labor, twentieth-century American novels, interior decoration, and “farm life” (Crowley, 2005, p. 39; Public Library Association, 2010). On the whole, the old RA was “geared specifically toward elevating public tastes, self-education, and adult learning” (Dali, 2014, p. 26).

It is important to note that the service treated nonfiction as “the gold standard” toward which all readers should strive (Crowley, 2005, p. 38). Librarians unequivocally aimed to elevate the common reader’s taste by recommending books of increasing “moral or literary quality,” gradually guiding patrons up a “reading ladder,” which began with mass fiction and peaked with “genres of nonfiction and nonnarrative writing” (Ross, 1987, pp. 153–154). As Wiegand (2015, p. 115) puts it, the early “reader’s advisor promoted purposeful, productive reading through a systematic process that favored useful knowledge and high culture literature”; the job of the advisor was essentially “to ‘prescribe’ books” that would help the reader improve their taste, character, and epistemic standing. This prescriptive approach found its theoretical justification in both the educational rationale for the public library and what Knox (2014, p. 15) terms “a traditional-modernist view of reading effects,” wherein “reading ‘good’ books will lead to ‘good’ outcomes [and] reading ‘bad’ books will lead to ‘bad’ outcomes.”

The old RA’s mid-century disappearance into reference services largely tracks the decline of the adult-education movement generally (Martin, 1998, p. 53), as well as a concomitant “diminished . . . philosophical commitment to [the library’s] educational and recreational responsibilities” following World War II (Crowley, 2005, p. 39). While there are surely a host of causal-historical factors leading up to the RA renaissance of the 1980s, Dilevko and Magowan (2007) have traced its roots to the academic legitimation of popular culture and the rise of the New Left during the 1960s. Among its most significant modifications, the new RA that began (in part) with *Genreflecting’s* first edition explicitly opposed efforts to elevate the tastes of ordinary readers; instead, it encouraged patrons to read what

they wanted and obligated librarians to come to their assistance, freshly armed with expert knowledge of genres, popular authors and titles, and literary appeal. RA thus reemerged in the 1980s as "a patron-centered library service for adult leisure readers" (Saricks, 2005, p. 1). The old RA, with its musty elitism and taste-based cultural coercion, was something of a distant memory.

As a core ideological text of the RA renaissance, *Genreflecting* has served as a popular practical guide for working readers' advisors, and as a textbook for library students in classes that deal with adult reading interests. The series played a significant role during the 1980s reconstruction of RA, as well as in the ethical norming of new readers' advisors. I take it that *Genreflecting's* central position in the RA landscape makes it a vital (and thus far largely untapped) resource for philosophical work on the service. Among other things, *Genreflecting* makes clear that contemporary RA adheres to (what I am calling) a pure preference satisfaction model in which readers' advisors have a duty to satisfy patrons' aesthetic preferences without judging or altering them.¹ Thus contemporary RA appears clearly more populist than its forbears: rather than promoting culturally elite taste as the regulative ideal for all readers, it privileges the diverse tastes of the common reader, with whom it is politically aligned. One could even reasonably go so far as to say that contemporary RA is anti-elitist in its philosophical commitments and practical objectives.

In this paper I interrogate these intuitions about contemporary RA to determine whether the service is in fact as straightforwardly populist as it prima facie seems. To do this, I begin with a brief account of the ideological tension between populism and elitism in the library profession, before turning to the issue of taste elevation as it is discursively constructed throughout *Genreflecting's* seven editions.

Through my investigation I determine that contemporary RA has not resolved the populist/elitist conflict in librarianship. While *Genreflecting* 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, while RA does not aim to elevate one's taste in particular books or genres, it is meant to cultivate in citizens a preference for pleasure reading. Insofar as RA is structured to instill such a preference in individuals, and insofar as *to prefer* is always *to prefer one thing over some alternative*, RA is essentially a project devoted to taste elevation in leisure activities.

IDEOLOGICAL TENSION: POPULISM AND ELITISM

In her study of ideological change in librarianship, Geller (1984, p. xix) defines three "major sources of potential value and role conflict" within the library profession:

- The first of these foundational dilemmas is a *populist/elitist* conflict “between the tastes of professionals and sponsors and the more popular taste for bestsellers of little literary value or lasting interest.”
- The second is a *neutrality/advocacy* dilemma that appears in the tension between the librarian’s obligation to adopt a nonpartisan stance with respect to political, moral, and epistemic disputes, and social responsibilities that sometimes count against neutrality.
- The final dilemma, *freedom/censorship*, “involves the attitude toward deviant ideas outside the framework of conventional debate.”

Geller’s three foundational dilemmas facilitate a productive approach to ideological tension in the library field, one that Pawley (2003) deploys to great effect in her article “Information Literacy: A Contradictory Coupling.” One can refer to the original source (Geller, 1984, p. xix) or to Pawley (2003, p. 428) for a clear exegesis of all three dilemmas. While my focus here is primarily on the conflict between populism and elitism, it is worth noting that each of the dilemmas is relevant in its own way to the theory and practice of contemporary RA.

As noted above, the populist/elitist dilemma arises from the persistent clash between mass and culturally elite tastes in the public library. On the one hand, librarians are public servants who seek to serve the needs of their communities and promote intellectual freedom; on the other, they are cultural gatekeepers employed by a state apparatus charged with cultivating an informed citizenry. The librarian can never fully embrace one of these roles over the other without undermining core values or abdicating professional responsibility.

Commonly known as the *fiction problem*, the classic late-nineteenth-century debate about whether, which, and to what extent fiction ought to be included in public library collections provides what is perhaps the canonical manifestation of this ideological tension. A relatively brief account of the fiction problem will help illustrate the populist/elitist dilemma, but it also serves as helpful background for any discussion of contemporary RA.

The fiction problem materialized against the backdrop of industrialization and the attendant proliferation of mass literacy and inexpensive books. These large-scale changes—and the popular literature they brought about—provoked anxiety in cultural elites who, according to Garrison (1979, p. 69), “were aware that one effect of the growth of mass literacy and popular culture would be to decentralize the influence once held by a small group over American letters.” Garrison describes enormous tension between the value system endorsed by literary conservatives (“a fusion of ascetic Protestantism and democratic capitalism” [p. 71]) and “the reality of mass tastes” (p. 68). Whereas the former counted in favor of a public library that served a purely educational function, the latter implicated that library in an emergent middle-class leisure culture.

Librarians unsuccessfully endeavored to limit fiction reading as best they could, employing two-book systems (that is, patrons could check out two books, but one of them had to be a nonfiction title) and policies that delayed the purchase of popular fiction titles until several months after their publication, such that readers' enthusiasm had time to wane (Carrier, 1965). Some libraries also used their newly open stacks to further deter patrons from reading fiction, as when the Los Angeles Public Library "opened stacks for nonfiction" in 1897, "but kept novels 'behind the rail'" (Wiegand, 2015, p. 79). We can read these efforts to suppress fiction circulation as part of a larger project aimed at maintaining cultural values under threat, particularly patriarchal and Protestant values. Those who feared the purported effects of fiction were almost inevitably thinking of its effects on women and children, with the former making up the majority of novel readers. As Radway (1997, p. 144) argues, "the debate over books and reading was a heavily gendered debate in the sense that cultural conservatives always associated the threat of cheap fiction and passive reading with the dangers of 'aimless,' 'indolent,' and 'ardent' femininity."

Ultimately, literary traditionalists perceived novels as a dangerous distraction from more disciplined reading: that which focused primarily on substantive works of nonfiction. Of course, despite this worry, those librarians who advocated what historian Carrier (1965) calls the "generous inclusion" of fiction did in fact prevail. However, it is important to recognize that even those who endorsed the inclusion of (some) popular works "would not tolerate the presence of immoral or vicious books, and agreed that libraries should not supply poor books" (p. 44). Wiegand (2015) notes that library leaders, while they may have disagreed on the value of particular titles, largely subscribed to what has been called the "library faith," or the belief "that by bringing the public to printed works that contained reliable information and useful knowledge, the public library would inevitably contribute to progress and social order" (pp. 75–76).

Where advocates of generous inclusion often diverged from their more conservative peers was in the increased humility that accompanied their aesthetic verdicts, and their conviction that "there was no use in furnishing only books so good that they would not be read" (Carrier, 1965, p. 44). These librarians acknowledged the state of mass taste, and inferred from it an obligation to help members of the public climb the proverbial "reading ladder, elevating reading taste and gradually leading the reader from lower to higher sorts of books" (Ross, 1987, p. 150). This involved beginning at a given reader's present "rung" and slowly climbing up through a stable literary hierarchy, with historical, philosophical, and theological works at the top.

While there were those who saw special value in fiction reading—for example, in its capacity to soothe the weary worker and divert attention from more objectionable activities (Carrier, 1965, pp. 76–77)—the basic

premise of generous inclusion was that it would facilitate an effective taste-elevation project that began with readers as they were presently constituted. Still, the victory of popular fiction in the public library can largely be attributed to the patrons who overwhelmingly preferred it from the very start. Fiction accounted for “65 to 75 percent of books circulated at the turn of the century” (Wiegand, 2015, p. 89), and after a certain point there was simply no putting the genie back in the bottle.

Generous inclusion represented a rather pragmatic approach to the undeniable state of mass taste, but it did not signal a resolution to the populist/elitist dilemma. Taste elevation as a conceit and the eventual RA service objective largely served to reassert the natural superiority of the tastes of the cultural elite, even as it justified significantly more populist collection-development practices.

As we will see, the contemporary ideology of RA entails opposition to efforts to elevate patrons’ tastes in books. This more recent egalitarianism generates a question about whether post-1980s RA has in fact resolved Geller’s dilemma: In their forceful rejection of taste elevation and cultural elitism, have post-1980s librarians recreated RA as a purely populist service? It is this question that drives my critical exploration of taste in the *Genreflecting* series.

METHODS

I presume at the outset of my examination that *Genreflecting* is a (surely imperfect) guide to the dominant ideology of contemporary RA.² I take its historical role in the RA renaissance, its regular updates by scholars and practitioners of RA, and its use as a textbook (or instrument of enculturation) to be evidence of this.³

Each edition of *Genreflecting* includes some form of introduction; a chapter or chapters on reading, the reader, and RA; and chapters on the individual genres (for example, western, science fiction, romance) for which authors and titles are listed and sometimes annotated. Because my interest was on the dispute surrounding taste elevation as a service objective, I focused primarily on the introductory materials in each edition. This is where the text does much of its direct ideological work, and also where it is explicitly instructional, addressing the ideal commitments and practices of the readers’ advisor.

Moving through the series chronologically, I performed a close reading of the introduction and first chapter(s) of each edition. I made note of differences and similarities and tracked important topics (for example, taste elevation, but also critical appraisal, the purposes of genre reading, the role of the library, and the education/entertainment dichotomy). I also attended holistically to the basic structure of each edition. (While outside the scope of the present paper, there would almost certainly be great value in a discourse or content analysis of the genre chapters, with their

attendant author/title lists, annotations, and discussions of appeal. I make note of this both as a limitation of my own project and as a suggestion for some other intrepid researcher.)

The *Genreflecting* series is the product of a number of different contributors, and in many cases material is reused and repurposed from edition to edition. The first four editions retain much of Rosenberg's original material, although Diana Tixier Herald became a coauthor/coeditor in the third edition, and officially took the helm in the fourth. The sixth edition is headed by Herald and includes contributions from other scholars, while in the seventh edition Cynthia Orr joins Herald as coeditor. To maintain clear attribution I always cite the first edition of *Genreflecting* in which a quote appears, and also make a point of noting the contributing author responsible for the text and the edition or editions that include that text. The editors and authors for each edition are shown in table 1.

Finally, a caveat before moving forward. My objective here is not to detract from the historical or ethical significance of the *Genreflecting* series; in some sense, it is in fact the opposite. It is because *Genreflecting* has been so

Table 1. The seven editions of *Genreflecting*

Edition	Publication year	Title	Editor(s) / author(s)	Other contributor(s) to introductory materials <i>only</i>
1	1982	<i>Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction</i>	Betty Rosenberg	N/A
2	1986	<i>Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction</i>	Betty Rosenberg	N/A
3	1991	<i>Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction</i>	Betty Rosenberg; Diana Tixier Herald	N/A
4	1995	<i>Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction</i>	Diana Tixier Herald	Betty Rosenberg (not listed)
5	2000	<i>Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction</i>	Diana Tixier Herald	N/A
6	2006	<i>Genreflecting: A Guide to Popular Reading Interests</i>	Diana Tixier Herald; Wayne A. Wiegand	Melanie A. Kimball; Catherine Sheldrick Ross
7	2013	<i>Genreflecting: A Guide to Popular Reading Interests</i>	Cynthia Orr; Diana Tixier Herald	N/A

successful that it is now the apt and long-overdue subject of philosophical inquiry. The scholars and practitioners (and scholar-practitioners) who revived RA during the 1980s clearly possessed an admirable egalitarian impulse, as well as a profound commitment to and respect for ordinary readers. I take it that this is similarly true of the contemporary librarians who have contributed to or otherwise made use of *Genreflecting*.

TASTE ELEVATION IN *GENREFLECTING*

As I have already noted, taste elevation was once an explicit aim of RA service. It is, however, systematically devalorized throughout *Genreflecting*. Notably, Rosenberg's First Law of Reading—"Never apologize for your reading tastes"—is included in every edition, even after her words have otherwise been superseded by those of newer contributors. Returning in the seventh edition to Rosenberg's "somewhat defiant" First Law of Reading, Orr (2013c, p. 54) constructs "a corollary: 'Be careful not to disparage anyone else's reading tastes.'" They even suggest "taking this corollary a step further by praising readers whenever possible," telling them, for example, that "You are one of our very best customers!" or "You set such a good example by reading" (p. 54). This is meant to help counteract the negative social messages patrons may have received about the value (or lack thereof) of reading for pleasure.

The dual notions that readers should feel confident in their present aesthetic taste and that the librarian should not seek to change that taste are threaded through each installment in the series. Rosenberg (1982, p. 32) notes that "librarians are . . . castigated for providing books of poor literary quality," and identifies an unfortunate "pressure on [librarians] to be concerned with improving patrons' tastes." Her statements are a straightforward reminder that contemporary RA rejects the recommendation model that once underpinned the service (Martin, 1998, pp. 52–54; Ross, 2006a, p. 211; Saricks, 2005, pp. 4–7). As Kimball (2006) notes in the sixth edition, the RA that blossomed in the 1920s "was prescriptive in nature; that is, librarians provided the expertise to guide patrons into a directed, systematic program of reading for improvement" (p. 16). In sharp contrast, the contributors to *Genreflecting* largely endorse and promote popular fiction reading in service of a variety of purposes, including, for example, escapism (editions 1 through 5), social-bonding and community-building (editions 6 and 7), and increased empathic capacity (edition 7). Meanwhile, criticisms of taste elevation gather steam as the series progresses, with references to RA's prescriptivist past frequently serving as a rhetorical device that situates the new RA's populist commitments in frank opposition to the old RA's elitist ones. Contemporary RA is thus often visible in relief: it is partly defined by *what it is not*, which also happens to be *what it used to be*.

In *Genreflecting* the unacceptability of taste elevation as a service ob-

jective would seem to be overdetermined. First, contributors argue that efforts to improve taste are unsuccessful because readers will read what they want regardless of librarians' appraisals; second, taste improvement is harmful in practice because it does damage to the librarian/reader relationship, such that advisors' ability to augment the social value of reading is hampered; finally, taste elevation is not possible because there is no universal literary hierarchy. I offer in turn a fuller account below of each of these objections.

Taste Elevation Does Not Work

With the possible exception of Rosenberg herself, the consensus among *Genreflecting* contributors is that attempts to improve patrons' tastes are objectionable, first and foremost, because they are inevitably ineffective. In the fifth edition, Herald (2000, p. xviii) observes that "common readers . . . know what they like and don't care about others' opinions of their reading tastes." In the sixth edition, Ross (2006b, p. 25) argues that "effective readers' advisors take a nonjudgmental approach that accepts readers' tastes and preferences and doesn't try to change or 'improve' them." In a similar vein, Orr (2013b, p. 28) states plainly in the seventh edition that "trying to change a reader's book preferences or 'elevate their tastes,' as librarians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries used to say, does not work."

On this shared view, the fact that taste elevation is doomed to failure counts in favor of an RA service that facilitates unencumbered choice. In their abundant pragmatism, these contributors very nearly echo the old advocates of generous inclusion. Interestingly, their argument also leaves open the possibility that taste elevation *would* be advisable in a world where it was effective. The following two objections, however, rule this out.

Taste Elevation Damages the Librarian/Reader Relationship

In the sixth edition, Wiegand (2006) stresses that the contemporary approach to RA (based on a pure preference satisfaction model) is best-suited to enhancing the social nature of reading. He argues that the public library is valuable at least in part because it provides "reading sites" where individuals can "exchange social capital" (p. 10). Wiegand is especially taken with readers' "imagined communities," or the groups in which "people organize themselves . . . in order to orient and affiliate with each other": "Cultural texts of all kinds," he says, "function as agents to help construct these imagined communities by providing common sets of experiences" (p. 6). In short, "reading constructs community" (p. 7). Wiegand raises the stakes of attempted taste elevation when he asserts that "as long as 'advisory' is defined to mean 'enabling choice' and not 'prescribing better' or 'elevating taste,' readers' advisors are likely to remain members (and be admitted to more) of these [imagined] communities" (p. 12).

Thus it is not merely the case that taste elevation does not work; efforts to improve taste are also actively detrimental to the project of RA, which is, in Wiegand's view, to maximize the social value of reading. While it is somewhat outside the scope of this paper, one might question his claim that reading "does more to draw people into groups than to separate them from one another," and further that group formation is an intrinsically positive development (p. 5).

Taste Elevation Is Conceptually Confused

The third objection to taste elevation represented in *Genreflecting* relates to *aesthetic subjectivism*, or the view that aesthetic value is "relative to the subjective feelings of audience members" (Young, 2009, p. 224). If this is right, then there is no universal aesthetic standard to which one might appeal in an effort to guide a reader to better and better books. No book is better or worse than another apart from an individual reader's assessment, and that assessment only has evaluative force for the reader herself. There is, further, no sound way to judge the quality of someone else's taste—taste is simply a set of personal preferences beyond reproach; it is not the sort of thing that is apt for improvement.

Ross (2006b) provides the fullest endorsement of subjectivism in the sixth edition, where she claims that "it is now generally recognized that the term 'a good book' is relative to the particular reader" (p. 25). The scope of "generally recognized" is not further delineated in context, although she does go on to suggest that when readers ask for a good book, they "may mean a book to match my mood right now, or a book that suits my level of reading ability, or a book that speaks to my particular interests" (p. 25) and so on. Ross seems to take it that readers' myriad purposes count against taste elevation, although they could just as easily serve as evidence that the practice of taste elevation must rigorously take the individual reader into account; that is, the readers' advisor might still aim to improve the patron's taste with respect to the *kind of thing* the reader prefers. For example, a librarian might direct an avid reader of historical romances to novels by Beverly Jenkins or Sarah MacLean because that librarian takes them to be more aesthetically praiseworthy than other similarly appealing titles. In that case "a good book" is still circumscribed by an individual reader in the sense that the reader makes certain aesthetic standards salient to their advisor; however, the book's value is not, strictly speaking, relative to that reader.

It is not clear whether Ross and I disagree on this point. Elsewhere, Ross (2009, p. 654) has argued that "the goal [of contemporary RA] can still be to recommend 'the best,' so long as the best is defined in the context of the particular reader reading at a particular time." This would seem to suggest at least some degree of like-mindedness. Nevertheless, she rules out taste elevation as an appropriate objective of RA, concluding that

unlike those earlier readers' advisors, whom Melanie Kimball describes in chapter 2 of [the sixth edition] as intent on pushing the reader up the reading ladder from light fiction to "serious" works, today's effective readers' advisor is nonjudgmental, values all kinds of reading, and takes the view that the reader, not the librarian, knows best what kind of reading experience is desired. (2006, p. 28)

On Ross's view, taste elevation is bound to a singular canon or reading ladder, one that devalues the popular literature that so many library patrons enjoy. Given that such a hierarchy depends on a universal aesthetic standard that Ross does not believe exists, taste elevation is ultimately conceptually confused.

BUT IS RA POPULIST?

Returning to Geller's populist/elitist dilemma is instructive here. It would appear that *Genreflecting* contributors seek to promote an RA that resolves the irresolvable: it is fundamentally populist, rejecting elite taste in favor of the varied tastes of what Rosenberg (1982, p. 27) called "the common reader." Given the purportedly unsolvable character of the dilemma, the portrayal of a wholly anti-elitist RA is cause for curiosity. Can it be that contemporary RA (constituted as it is in *Genreflecting*) effectively settles the conflict "between the tastes of professionals . . . and the more popular taste" (Geller, 1984, p. xix)? If it does, it is by siding firmly with the latter, promoting that which readers already enjoy and sidelining the tastes of librarians and other cultural elites. As Orr (2013c) puts it to readers' advisors in her first golden rule of RA in the seventh edition, "it's not about you" (p. 55).

There is certainly a rather significant empirical question buried here. For all the studies on readers and reading cited in the different editions of *Genreflecting*, there is virtually no attention paid to whether setting aside one's own aesthetic taste is feasible in practice. It would seem there is some presumption that it is. However, given minimally the strength of certain implicit or unconscious biases, this strikes me as somewhat implausible. At the very least, it is an area in need of further investigation.

That said, if we stipulate that librarians can unproblematically disregard their own aesthetic preferences as they make reading recommendations, a purely populist RA seems *prima facie* within reach. The *Genreflecting* series constructs contemporary RA as a largely neutral "matchmaking service" in which advisors serve as "the link between readers and books" (Orr, 2013a, p. 19; Ross, 2006b, p. 25). Kimball's (2006) brief history of RA in the sixth edition juxtaposes this present-day approach with an earlier phase of service in which "librarians saw it as their professional duty to be the arbiters of what constituted 'good' reading" (p. 15). In *Genreflecting*, those who question the aims and practices of contemporary RA are largely lumped together. For instance, Herald (2000) notes in the fifth edition that while

“critics, scholars, and *even some librarians* hope to elevate the tastes of the reading public, readers continue to read what they like” (p. xv; emphasis added). The readers’ advisor is thus redefined in opposition to snobby academics and (a minority of) unenlightened practitioners. That a large proportion of library patrons (that is, ordinary readers) wants popular fiction serves in the fifth edition as a justification for RA service:

As a gatekeeper, a librarian may question the value of dispensing the latest Stephen King horror novel or Catherine Coulter romance to eager patrons, or may wonder how to justify the expenditure of library funds on popular fiction. Yet it is in this capacity as a provider of genre fiction that librarians may be able to best serve their publics. Circulation figures consistently demonstrate that library users seek and use fiction collections as much or more than other parts of the library. (p. xvii)

Contemporary RA would appear to involve rejecting the traditional gatekeeping role to which Herald refers: a (populist) impulse to serve the public eclipses the gatekeeper’s anxiety about “the value of dispensing” popular fiction. Unlike librarians on both sides of the fiction problem, present-day readers’ advisors do not take themselves to be “arbiters of what [constitutes] ‘good’ reading” (Kimball, 2006, p. 15); instead, they serve as matchmakers between readers and reading material, deploying thoughtful techniques to identify patrons’ preferences and selecting several books that fit those preferences. Gone are elitist concerns about the aesthetic or moral value of books; in contemporary RA, the reader determines what is best.

Decidedly populist though it seems, there are at least two reasons to question the plausibility of this picture. The first relates to *Genreflecting*’s inclusion criteria: there is an important sense in which librarians continue to perform the canonizing function within a newly expanded literary field. The second involves the desire to promote reading as a worthwhile recreational activity.

RA Performs the Canonizing Function

As library historian and bibliographer Don Krummel (1988, p. 244) notes, “Correctly or ill-advisedly, for better or worse, printed bibliographies ‘canonize’ the literature, as they hold it still in a historical instant.” Given that *Genreflecting* in large part is composed of printed lists of suggested authors and titles, it constitutes what he calls a “canonic bibliography” (p. 244). The criteria for inclusion, however, are meant to capture popularity (associated here with likely enjoyment) and not aesthetic value. In fact, Rosenberg (1982) explicitly draws this distinction: “[One] criterion for inclusion in this guide is sheer quantity [of titles published by an author], *not necessarily linked to quality*” (p. 21; emphasis added).

This distinction falls away in the post-Rosenberg editions, although the criteria for inclusion do not change much over the course of the series. These criteria include the prolificacy of the author, the practical availability of the title, and the existence of some established fan base. Occasionally, "authors are included who have written only a few novels that have made a tremendous impact on their specific genre or who are relatively new authors who are popular or show marked promise" (Herald, 2000, p. xxii).

It is true that none of these criteria appeals directly to a universal aesthetic standard; instead, the criteria emphasize popularity among ordinary readers, which is presumably thought to have some predictive power. As criteria for inclusion in a "canonic bibliography," one might then think of them as maximally populist.

However, even if contemporary RA advocates explicitly dispense with the universal aesthetic standard, they still appear to be engaged in the practices of selecting evaluative standards (or alternative criteria for canonization), with real implications for patrons' access and reading patterns, and rejecting their role as aesthetic judge while appealing to proxy measures for aesthetic value. With regard to the latter, the sixth and seventh editions include symbols next to titles that suggest certain markers of quality, such as literary awards, movie and television adaptations, and the "respect" of genre readers. Indeed, in the seventh edition, Orr (2013d, p. 46) writes that "winning an award doesn't necessarily mean that a book is a great read . . . but it's a good indication." The claim that readers' advisors are no longer "arbiters" of aesthetic value has significantly less populist force if the buck is passed—that is, if librarians simply defer to other cultural authorities for their aesthetic verdicts.

RA Is Still about Taste Elevation

Much of the anti-elitist work performed in *Genreflecting* is aimed at *taste elevation*. Insofar as readers' advisors have abandoned the practice of directing patrons to better and better books (in accordance with some purportedly universal standard), they have taken the service in a distinctly more populist and egalitarian direction. That said, taste elevation is a much more general concept than contemporary readers' advisors seem willing to recognize. Efforts to improve someone's preferences need not be limited to the selection of specific books; indeed, in the case of RA, taste elevation is no longer about improving one's taste in reading material, but instead about improving one's taste in leisure activities.

Genreflecting contributors agree that recreational reading is valuable—intrinsically and/or extrinsically—and that promoting it is an important function of the public library. There is even some indication that the goal of contemporary RA is to transform patrons into avid readers—individuals

who are disposed to read whenever they can. Orr (2013a) implies as much in the seventh edition when she argues that “if readers have trouble finding good stories that they will find pleasurable, and potential readers who never find a pleasurable book will never become avid readers, then it follows that successfully suggesting a book to a reader is extremely important work” (p. 12).

At the very least, RA constitutes an effort to get the reluctant patron to read for pleasure and to support the patron who already does so (such that they will continue). In the first case, RA is clearly meant to be transformative, and in both cases it is normative in the sense that it promotes the idea that we ought to read recreationally. We should derive pleasure from reading, and deriving pleasure from reading is contingent on finding the right book. This is where the readers’ advisor comes in.

Ultimately, advisors hope that their patrons will spend (more) time with books, but this inevitably means dedicating time to reading that could be spent doing something else. For example, let us say that on a typical day I have three hours of leisure time. Generally speaking, I spend two of those hours woodworking and the third watching *Golden Girls* reruns. The rest of my time is consumed by my job, errands, meal preparation, eating, and sleeping. In other words, those are not hours during which reading is feasible. In order to become a reader, I would need to reallocate a portion of my leisure time—time I would otherwise spend woodworking or watching *Golden Girls*—to reading books. At a minimum, readers’ advisors think that, *ceteris paribus*, this is a thing that I should do because reading is valuable—even if this only means that it has the capacity to bring me pleasure. Of course, my other leisure time pursuits also give me pleasure, so reading would need to be a superior pleasure producer in terms of, for example, its intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, nearness or remoteness, fecundity, purity, or extent (Bentham, 1789/2010). Alternatively, it might be that some readers’ advisors take a more Millian approach in which reading is a form of higher pleasure—that is, it generates pleasure *of a different kind* than some of my other activities (Mill, 1861/2005).

In any event, the goal to get me reading is inextricably bound to the idea that I should prefer reading books to doing something else, at least some of the time. Cultivating such a preference for reading, then, is about improving my taste in leisure activities. Further, if one agrees with Orr that RA is about turning people into avid readers, the strength of my preference will need to be quite strong, such that I devote a much larger proportion of my recreational time to books.

The upshot here is that taste elevation remains an essential part of RA, despite objections articulated in *Genreflecting*. Rather than being a purely populist endeavor, contemporary RA is (probably unavoidably) a normative project aimed at improving, and perhaps even disciplining, the masses.

CONCLUSION

Pawley (2003) argues that the ideological tension embodied in Geller's three paradigmatic professional dilemmas is inescapable. In her view the contradictions that these dilemmas produce quite simply "come with the job" of being a librarian. Of much greater concern to Pawley is our intermittent "failure to acknowledge and come to terms with" ideological tension, a misstep that may lead us to "unconsciously [subvert] a fundamental belief to which most librarians adhere without reservation: support for citizen empowerment and democracy" (p. 428).

This, I take it, is an important worry to keep in view. If Pawley is correct, we ought not be surprised that the populist/elitist tension is alive and well in contemporary RA. There is simply no resolving it. The larger concern is about whether and in what ways this tension gets acknowledged within the RA community. It is true that *Genreflecting* repeatedly recognizes the existence of professional friction surrounding adult popular literature, as when Herald (2000, p. xvii) notes that "nearly 20 years after publication of the first edition . . . the controversy rages" over maintaining collections of genre fiction. However, this controversy is never depicted as arising from any legitimate disputes; that is, *Genreflecting* is more or less satisfied with the assertion that some people still object to genre fiction in the public library, but that these people are wrong. This presents us with a somewhat superficial view of ideological tension within the library profession, and it certainly does not leave open sufficient room for nuanced debate about the politics of RA. To act as if contemporary RA is an unmitigated and purely populist success is to ignore, among other things, the many ways in which it serves to bolster an expert culture from which librarians benefit directly. If we are fundamentally committed to providing "support for citizen empowerment and democracy" (Pawley, 2003, p. 428), then we must be willing to engage in difficult conversations about the services we provide and the ideological tension in which they are inextricably caught. RA is no exception.

NOTES

1. I have termed this the *pure preference satisfaction model* (PPSM) because I believe it makes apparent what is being valorized and centered in contemporary RA service: the ordinary reader's preferences. Elsewhere in the LIS literature, the PPSM is sometimes referred to as the "give 'em what they want" approach, a moniker originated in the 1960s by Charlie Robinson of the Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL) system in Maryland to describe patron-mediated collection development. Although the BCPL's approach provides a historical antecedent to the PPSM, "give 'em what they want" (as a term of art) lacks sufficient precision within the RA context; it has also accrued something of a pejorative ring that could potentially poison the well, as is the case in Dilevko and Magowan's (2007) *Reader's Advisory Service in North American Public Libraries, 1870–2005*.
2. Although the term *ideology* and derivations thereof are often used pejoratively, that is not my intention here. Rather, I take a more general view, wherein *ideology* is simply any system of fundamental beliefs to which some group subscribes. Use of this terminology is not meant to imply that adherence to some ideology constitutes false consciousness or

experience systematically distorted by a hegemonic worldview, nor that individuals will always and only act in accordance with their professed ideological commitments.

3. All seven editions of *Genreflecting* emphasize its potential use as a textbook for library school students. Textbook use is first treated explicitly as the primary purpose of *Genreflecting* in the first two editions, then as a secondary purpose in the third through sixth editions, and finally as the first in a list of several possible purposes in the seventh edition. Moreover, an informal review of publicly available syllabi corroborated my anecdotal sense that recent editions of *Genreflecting* are commonly used as required texts in RA courses.

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