

Reading revived: a history of readers' advisory services in Australian public libraries

By

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Abstract

Since the early 2000s there has been a revival of interest in the professional practice of readers' advisory work in Australian public libraries. The last decade has seen systematic attention to readers' advisory staff training, and growth in reader-focused services, events, programs, displays and promotion. Reading, for all purposes, is now promoted within a broader spectrum of library services and activities. The paper explores Australian library literature and the popular press to discover attitudes to fiction and recreational reading and the concept of 'readers' advice'. Promotion of reading for enjoyment has not always been regarded as a priority, or even as having value. The role of libraries in the past was often seen to be to 'improve' the reader, with leisure reading and non-information-related reading services receiving little emphasis or promotion. The paper comments on the history and change in readers' advisory services in public libraries in Australia, particularly in NSW.

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Introduction

Whilst the public library has always had a role in the provision of fiction, promotion of reading for enjoyment has not always been regarded as a priority, with leisure reading and non-information-related reading services receiving little management or training emphasis and little promotion. In early years reading for 'improvement' was prioritised, and later in the 20th century public libraries emphasised their role as information centres and their services to special groups in the community.

In the past decade there has been a revival of interest in the professional practice of adult readers' advisory work, and increased focus on readers' advisory activities in Australian public libraries, with systematic attention to staff training, and growth in reader-focused and reading-related services, events, programs, displays and promotion.

From a practitioner's point of view this paper explores the history, attitudes to, and changes in readers' advisory services in public libraries in Australia, with particular focus on New South Wales.

What is 'readers' advisory'?

'Readers' advisory' is a term used in library work to describe assisting readers to find something they are interested in reading. In more recent years the term has been used to include suggestions in other formats such as games, film or DVDs. The term 'materials advisory' may be used for this broader description, but it is often all clustered under the term 'readers' advisory'. Pleasure is an important element.

In contemporary public library practice in Australia, we define 'readers' advisory' as:

A service in which knowledgeable, non-judgemental library staff help readers with their leisure reading needs. Using knowledge of fiction and non-fiction material, of the library collection, and print and electronic reference tools, the readers' adviser helps the reader answer the question 'What do I read next?' The service includes suggesting new or unfamiliar authors and topics or genres, interesting casual readers in more systematic reading, maintaining contacts with local educational agencies, promoting reading and encouraging use of library services.¹

The definition is based on Joyce Saricks' wording but provides more detail.² It is also informed by the concept of 'reader development' from the United Kingdom (see below).

Over the years various terms have been used for this type of work in libraries, including 'readers' adviser', 'reader advice', 'reader guidance'.

The expressions 'readers' adviser' (or its alternate spelling 'advisor') and 'readers' advisory' are common usage in North America. This terminology is also widely used across most of Australia and New Zealand. In the United Kingdom the practices and activities which we call readers' advisory work are known as 'reader development'. In Victoria the expression 'reader development' is preferred to 'readers' advisory'.

Reader development in the United Kingdom

'Reader development' as a focus of professional practice began to receive increased attention in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Whilst fiction accounted for 70% of adult loans, it was low priority for library management and training—information services, information technology and community services receiving greater attention.³

Rachel Van Riel (said to have first formulated the principles of 'reader development') wrote that

Reader development is a useful shorthand for describing an area of professional practice. Reader development means active intervention to increase people's confidence and enjoyment of reading, to open up reading choices, and to offer opportunities to share reading experience.⁴

She goes on to say that 'Reader development is founded on the equality of different readers and different reading preferences'. Thus, reader development is defined as

active intervention to:

- *increase people's confidence and enjoyment of reading*
- *open up reading choices*
- *offer opportunities for people to share their reading experience*
- *raise the status of reading as a creative activity.⁵*

These principles are similar to those labelled 'readers' advisory'.

Readers' advisory services in North America

The history of readers' advisory work in North America is well documented. One writer, Bill Crowley, remarks that

*It is probably safe to assert that readers advisory existed, even without the name, as long as public and other library staff actually talked about books with patrons, users, or customers.*⁶

In 1876 Samuel Swett Green expressed, in the article 'Personal relations between librarians and readers', what appears to be early reader advice. It was a judgemental article, but it well represented the attitudes of the time towards readers obtaining assistance in a library. There are hints of what we recognise today as good practice:

It is a common practice ... for users of a library to ask the librarian or his assistants to select stories for them... Place in the circulating department one of the most accomplished persons in the corps of your assistants--some cultivated woman, for instance, who heartily enjoys works of the imagination, but whose taste is educated...

Instruct this assistant to consult with every person who asks for help in selecting books. This should not be her whole work; for work of this kind is best done when it has the appearance of being performed incidentally. Let the assistant, then, have some regular work, but such employment as she can at once lay aside when her aid is asked for in picking out books to read. I am confident that in some such way as this a great influence can be exerted in the direction of causing good books to be used. The person placed in charge of this work must have tact, and be careful not to attempt too much. If an applicant would cease to consult her unless she gives him a sensational novel, I would have her give him such a book. Only let her aim at providing every person who applies for aid with the best book he is willing to read.

...

Certain mental qualities are requisite or desirable in library officers who mingle with readers. Prominent among these is a courteous disposition which will disclose itself in agreeable manners. Sympathy, cheerfulness, and patience are needful. Enthusiasm is as productive of good results here as elsewhere.

*A librarian should be as unwilling to allow an inquirer to leave the library with his question unanswered as a shop-keeper is to have a customer go out of his store without making a purchase.*⁷

Green identified the benefits:

Among the good results which attend personal intercourse on the part of the librarian with users of popular libraries, the following may be mentioned

First. If you gain the respect and confidence of readers, and they find you easy to get at and pleasant to talk with, great opportunities are afforded of stimulating the love of study and of directing investigators to the best sources of information.

Second. You find out what books the actual users of the library need, and your judgment improves in regard to the kind of books it is best to add to it. ...

Third. One of the best means of making a library popular is to mingle freely with its users, and help them in every way. ...

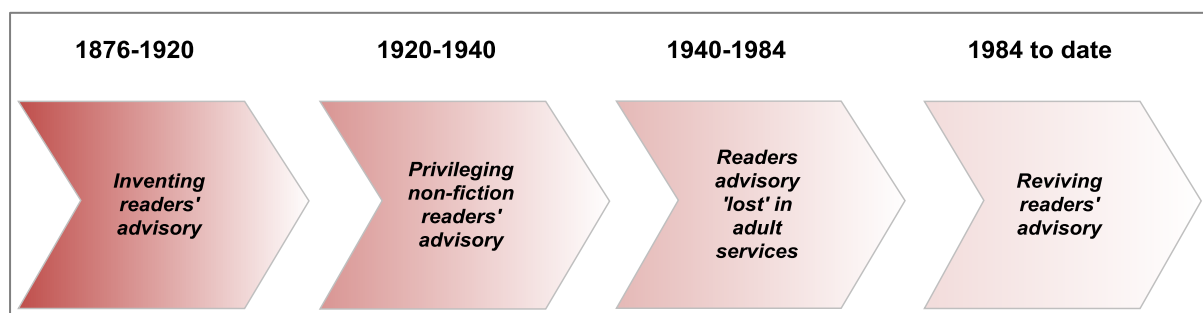
Fourth, and last. *The collections of books which make up the contents of the circulating departments of our libraries have been provided for the use of persons of differing degrees of refinement and moral susceptibility, and for those who occupy mental planes of various altitudes.*⁸

The Readers' advisory service of the St. Louis public library, published in 1929, is one of the few works on this subject at this time which actually mentions pleasure.⁹ In doing so it is combining the personal education element of readers' advice with some hope that the reader will enjoy the experience. This is not all the way to current readers' advisory practices, but it is more hopeful than some of the practices a few decades each side of it.

The 1941 research published as *Readers' Advisers at work: a survey of development in the New York Public Library*¹⁰ focuses on the education and reference elements, and 'efforts are made to guide the reader to the particular book or books which meets his need'. This quote is also a good fit for current readers' advisory services.

Crowley envisions at least four periods of readers' advisory history (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Crowley's readers' advisory timeline (USA)



In his discussion of 'lost in adult services' Crowley refers to the post-World War II US Public Library Inquiry which, he says,

*emphasized that a mainstream professional ideology existed within the public library community supporting the commitment "to serve the community as general center of reliable information and to provide opportunity and encouragement for people of all ages to educate themselves continuously." The Inquiry dismissed the importance of the public library's recreational role or "giving people what they want" as a distinct negative. It further asserted that librarians who viewed the public library as a "free, miscellaneous book service supported by the public for that purpose" were cleaving to a course of action that would diminish or even doom the institution in the new communications age.*¹¹

Key points which mark the revival and the re-prioritising of fiction and recreational reading are the founding of the Adult Reading Round Table in Illinois, the beginning of a focus on continuing education and training for readers' advisers in the USA, and the first editions of now-standard texts from the USA¹² and the UK (Table 1).

Table 1. Key points in the revival of readers' advisory work

1982	<i>Genreflecting; a guide to reading interests in genre fiction</i> by Betty Rosenberg published by Libraries Unlimited, Littleton, Colorado. ¹³ Genre fiction defined and described as a tool for librarians (now in its 7 th edition ¹⁴)
1984	Adult Reading Round Table (AART) established in Chicago area to promote and provide continuing education on reader services for adults
1989	<i>Readers' advisory service in the public library</i> , by Joyce G. Saricks and Nancy Brown first published by the American Library Association ¹⁵ (now in its 3 rd edition ¹⁶)
1993	<i>Who else writes like ...? A reader's guide to fiction authors</i> first published by Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK ¹⁷ (now in its 7 th edition ¹⁸)
1993	Mary Chelton, 'Read any good books lately? Helping patrons find what they want.' <i>Library Journal</i> , vol. 118, Issue 8, May 1, 1993, p33-36
1994	NoveList readers' advisory database, conceived in 1990, launched as a DOS product ¹⁹

A somewhat different, more controversial view is taken by Dilevko and Magowan who present a 'critical history of readers' advisory philosophy based on interpretation and analysis of published sources', dividing the history of North American readers' advisory into three phases:

1870–1916 – 'the formative years'

1917–1962 – 'the commitment to systematic adult education'

1963–2005 – 'the devolution into entertainment'.²⁰

Whilst many writers consider that reader's advisory has revived in the period since 1984 to an improved service model—even a renaissance—Dilevko and Magowan disagree. They argue instead that post-1980 readers' advisory has 'lost its way' and

focused less on the meaningful educational and cultural rationale with which it was associated in its earlier phases than on a mindset in which the reading of books, no matter what their intrinsic quality, is construed as good and where discretionary reading becomes commodified and disposable entertainment, as manifested principally in genre fiction and genre nonfiction ..., bestsellers, celebrity-authored books, and prize-winning titles.²¹

They see this focus as an outgrowth of the 1960s 'Give 'Em What They Want' movement, which 'entrenched demand-driven collection development ...', and opened up public libraries to popular culture. They argue that if readers' advisory in North American public libraries is to be a real force in community life in the 2000s and beyond, it should return to the role it played between 1917 and 1962 – striving to provide meaningful educational opportunities based on serious, sustained and purposeful reading of enduring books, rather than focusing on short-term entertainment or 'edutainment'.²²

Based on the literature, social media and the publishing output of the American Library Association (ALA) and Libraries Unlimited (each of which publish a Readers Advisory Series of publications), we see no sign of abatement of enthusiasm for the practice of readers' advisory in helping people with leisure reading.

But, what happened in Australia? We've looked at the Australian library literature and the popular press to discover attitudes to fiction and recreational reading and the concept of 'readers' advice'.

Late 19th century/early 20th century attitudes in Australia

In 1995 Bob Pymm wrote of the 'fiction problem', outlining the conflict of user demand for fiction with librarians' desires to provide their users with uplifting educational material.²³ At the 1996 Australian Library History Forum, Peter Mansfield talked of changing attitudes to fiction, discussing libraries as 'places of public improvement, not entertainment', with examples from the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia.²⁴

Elsewhere Mansfield notes that Redmond Barry, founder of the Melbourne Public Library (forerunner of the State Library of Victoria)

*insisted that the MPL's role was to acquire serious books of the highest quality and that the acquisition of recreational reading was an inappropriate use of public money. ... The MPL operated in accordance with Barry's firm belief that access to the best British literary and cultural traditions was a right of all Victorian colonists ...*²⁵

The 1939 NSW *Public Library Services* report made it clear that librarians had an important role in assisting readers

*Modern library service would provide balanced collections of books even in the smaller country centres. Readers could examine and select from these collections for themselves. At the same time they would have the benefit of discussion with a trained librarian or readers' adviser, who would note their needs and, if necessary, meet them with books from larger collections in regional and central libraries.*²⁶

There are other references in the late 1940s to library people in Australian holding positions of 'readers' adviser', including mentions in Burnie, Tasmania in 1948²⁷ and Melbourne, Victoria in 1949.²⁸ This role of 'reader advice' is very different from modern readers' advisory services. The 1940s library workers providing readers' advice are based on the model from the USA where

*Any ambitious person may go to the New York Public Library and consult a sympathetic Readers' Advisor as to the best course of reading to help him improve his mind or solve some particular problem. There are special children's rooms, too, where books are on low shelves within easy reach of young visitors and where, at stated intervals, fascinating stories are told to children who have not yet learned to read.*²⁹

This is readers' advice for the purposes of education and not for leisure and enjoyment. Some elements of this readers' advice would now be included in reference services, but others would be far too presumptuous for library staff to provide. The use of masculine gender to cover both male and female is typical of the time, and while apparently (to the 21st century reader) excluding women, may not have been doing so.

In 1941 the New York Public Library (NYPL) published the results of a detailed survey, showing that about 55 per cent of people came to the library to find reading with no specific title in mind.³⁰ Although there is no comparable Australian survey data for this time, this NYPL information can be used to indicate the potential high level of need for readers' advisory services. More information about this interpretation of 'readers' advice' may be found in the detailed work by Jennie M. Flexner and Sigrid A. Edge called *A readers' advisory service*, published in 1934.³¹

An example of a 'readers' advice' service is the selections of reference works provided by the Public Library, Sydney (now the State Library of NSW) through its Country Circulation Department. The service is described in *The Cootamundra Herald* 3 July 1931 ('no fiction is included' ³²) and represented by posters promoting the service.³³ The same article also describes diverse boxes of books, again containing no fiction, but sent to support teachers. Perhaps these could be interpreted as having elements of 'non-fiction readers' advisory' services. The boxes of children's books which were sent may have had similar elements.

The non-judgemental aspect of readers' advisory services is important today. We all have different books we like to read. *The Horsham Times* reports Mr Lucas of the local public library (membership by subscription) as saying in 1947

"The good readers read the good books" says Mr. Lucas, when speaking of the Horsham reading public's taste in literature. Many professional men of the town avidly devour the numerous mysteries and westerns available, he adds." ³⁴

This is interesting as it starts with a judgement about good readers reading good books (and each of us has different books we think are good) but then becomes inclusive and generous towards genre readers (who even today can experience discrimination) in his comments about professional men and their reading.

In contrast, a judgemental approach is apparent in the description of the Port Adelaide Library in 1897:

The members of the Committee of Management at Port Adelaide are impressed with the fact that the reading public is ever asking for more, and that while a certain percentage of the patrons of the Institute observes the advice to read no book which is not worth reading time and again, no library can lay claim to being up to date which is not receiving from time to time the latest productions of master minds. ³⁵

This shows a value judgement which is in conflict with today's non-judgemental readers' advisory services, but it also shows that people were choosing their own reading, despite the library staff.

Another glimpse of the judgemental way in which leisure reading was seen in 1921:

Of course we read; few nations read more. We are inveterate readers, chiefly of things that don't much matter. Scrap reading goes on incessantly ... but in a few hours the mind contains no residuum. Such reading is not only valueless, it is positively pernicious. There is no real reading where there is no mental concentration.

Reading is nowadays a social obligation. You owe it to society to keep yourself informed as to what is going on around you and in lands beyond you. But all that [scrap reading] is not reading. That sort of reading resembles smoking. Both may be enjoyable, but you cannot nourish your body by constant smoking; you cannot nourish your mind by constant light reading. Women are incorrigible readers of light literature. . The female fiction reader is the backbone of the subscription library. Comparatively few women read heavy matter ... So most women go on reading the latest exciting or amusing novel. There is a distinct place in life for fiction. The trouble is that fiction occupies too much space in the mental premises. Clear distinction must be made between reading for pleasure and reading for instruction. ³⁶

The author goes on:

Solid reading is a tonic, light reading is a narcotic; the community teems with readers who are consciously and hopelessly drugged. ³⁷

Early calls for public libraries emphasised the 'reader improvement' function. In *The Goulburn Herald and County of Argyle Advertiser*, there was a call for a public library, and this 23 September 1848 response has some interesting aspects.

*We trust our townsmen, although at the eleventh hour, will show they are not tied and bound to their desks, to their counters, and their glue-pots, that they are capable of other things besides discussing village politics, and designs for flags and 'banners (all of which are fit and proper on fit and proper occasions),--that when the little Amateur Theatre at "John O'Brien's" shall weary instead of amuse, they can still command an equal amount, at least, of intellectual enjoyment,--that they will show, in fine, there is sufficient intelligence and desire of information amongst them, to appreciate and support a Public Library, and that no delay will be lost in wiping out the reproach that so thriving and wealthy a community can scarcely muster 150 volumes of books of real improvement.*³⁸

This quotation puts the call for the library in context and shows how the value of the reading is perceived, that the books need to be of 'real improvement'. This is taking a 'readers' advice' approach, before the term was used, rather than the current non-judgemental approach of 'readers' advisory services'.

The following, written in 1886 also demonstrates a very judgemental attitude towards readers

*In these days of feverish excitement, and high pressure system in every department of life, it would be pleasant to know some haven of rest to flee to, perhaps no better panacea is to be found than reading. Our libraries teem with healthy and interesting literature, yet, alas ! they are too often deserted and the works become dust-covered on account of the marked lack of inclination existent in women to read. This should not be in a country where bright, intelligent, active-brained ladies abound. The habit is all that is wanting. The spirit of enterprise in this direction is already awakening, and if ladies knew individually the charm, so different to the bustle of shopping, and the fussiness of fashion compared to the delightful quiet of reading, the practice would be more universally cultivated. It would be weary to wade through pages, however well written, if the desire to do so was absent. The best plan would be to systematically set apart a portion of the day for mind culture; the attraction, by force of habit, then grows upon one. This system, pursued purely as a labor of love, backed by earnest desire for improvement, by many French and English women is a shining example, resulting, as a rule, in independence of mind, and that charming ease of manner that is conclusive proof of the freshness and earnest loving heartedness of cultured women.*³⁹

This is disturbing reading today because of the heavy judgement about what is read, and the purposes of reading. It also focuses on women with significant leisure as the alternative to reading is not work, whether paid or at home, but shopping and fashion.

This article from 1910 mentions a possible role for libraries, but again, demonstrates a judgemental attitude towards what is read.

What reading matter, apart from your schoolbooks, occupies a part of your spare time ? ... It is a fact that a very large proportion of young people do not know what to read and get very little help from teachers or parents. This can be remedied to a certain extent by making use of the public libraries. ... Happy is the boy who has been drawn to the reading of good, useful books. As he grows older his regular work, whatever it may be, will increase in interest, his mind expand, and his thoughts and ideas will become high and noble. I would strongly advise boys who wish

to make something of themselves, who are desirous of obtaining a wider and fuller knowledge than their school text-books can give them, to read systematically books of history, science, biography, essays, and poetry. By doing so you will make yourself master of a larger vocabulary of words, and be able to spell, punctuate, and capitalise correctly; your outlook upon life and its possibilities also, will become broader, and your capacity and ability and power to undertake greater duties and enterprises will be immeasurably increased. Read carefully and slowly. Unfortunately it is a fact that a boy tries to read a book as quickly as possible. He wants to get to the end. The style of the author or some particular passage, gets no especial attention. This kind of reading does not do much good.

*It is simply time wasted. If a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well, and this applies to book reading. Further, keep away from trashy literature. You had better read nothing than fill your mind with hair-splitting duels, blood-shedding villains, and scenes of crime and misery. Read such authors as Scott, Dickens, Macaulay, Stevenson, Kipling, Cooper, Collins, Poe, Hale, Eliot, Kingsley, Hawthorne, Wallace, Longfellow, Tennyson. You will acquire a taste for good reading which will become a fascination and delight throughout your life.*⁴⁰

We note that George Eliot appears to be the only woman in the reading list and that may be a mistake because of her pseudonym. It is interesting that 'scenes of crime and misery' are to be avoided for reading, and yet Dickens, who includes much misery and some crime, is included. This description does make reading sound enjoyable, but as the focus is on 'improving' oneself; it does not sound a path of pleasure. This is not the way of 'readers' advisory services' as we know them now, and demonstrates why libraries may have decided to go down the path of 'readers' advice' for personal education in the 1940s and 1950s.

In contrast is a quote from Lord Sherbrooke in 1869, but which was published in the Chronicle, Adelaide in 1930:

*Cultivate, above all things, a taste for reading. There is no pleasure so cheap, so innocent, and so remunerative as the real, hearty pleasure and taste for reading. It does not come to everyone naturally. Some people take to it naturally, and others do not; but I advise you to cultivate it, and endeavor to promote it in your minds. In order to do that you should read what amuses you and pleases you. You should not begin with difficult works, because if you do you will find the pursuit dry and tiresome. I would even say to you, read novels, read frivolous books, read anything that will amuse you, and give you a taste for reading.*⁴¹

This quotation is interesting as it is one of the few which speaks of reading pleasure, at least early on. That 'you should read what amuses you' is a principle we espouse today and can cover anything from *The walking dead* to *Twilight* as well as Brian Cox and Bjork. Reading for pleasure is a strong principle of readers' advisory services and a key role of trained library staff is helping library clients explore what may amuse them.

Also in 1930, the Premier of Western Australia, Sir James Mitchell, suggests a reading scheme targeting boys when they leave school, particularly those living in country areas. It is to

promote a love of reading directed to practical ends... Some competent body is needed, he argues, to advise as to the books suitable for different types of minds. He would early wean the youth of the State from the trashy novel, and even prevent acquaintance with it; he would cultivate in boys a taste for easily-read, wholesome, informative literature that would pave the way to a study of text-books bearing on their particular callings, and so gradually awaken their

*interest in the big affairs and men of the world. The great thing is, he says, to train them to read well, and that their choice of books may be wisely directed, has asked Professor Murdoch, Professor Cameron, Mr. W. Clubb (Director of Education), and Mr. H. J. Lambert (editor of 'The West Australian'), to act as an advisory committee, with Mr F. G. Steere (Assistant-Parliamentary Librarian) as correspondent.*⁴²

This has elements of non-fiction readers' advisory services, and nominates some high-powered people to make suggestions. However, the reference to 'books suitable for different minds' does not seem to be referring to the diverse appeal characteristics which we recognise in contemporary fiction and genre material.⁴³

A Melbourne article from 1934 discusses the parent's role in encouraging children to read

*It is with fairy stories that we should first begin our acquaintance with the world outside our own – not only with those immortal story-tellers, Hans Andersen and Grimm, but the numerous legends and translations of Continental and foreign fairy-tales. Fairy-stories, where good always triumphs over evil; where all is beautiful, except when badness transfigures; where everything is exaggerated, but where cynicism and the bitter rebuffs of actual fact have not penetrated, to strip life of its glamor. As children grow a little older, and come to know and love animals, there are stories which will help them understand them, and conquer any lurking fears of them that may be worrying them. There are animal stories in every language, which will bring the children, in a simple way, to a better knowledge of other countries.*⁴⁴

We may have issues with this language today, but it does have a more positive and less judgemental approach towards reading, acknowledging both the enjoyment of reading and its informative nature. The article continues

*To conclude, I should like to speak about the several children's libraries in Melbourne. In charge of each one is someone with a wide knowledge of books for children. They are all willing to help you choose wisely, and to aid the child in selection.*⁴⁵

The Argus in Melbourne from 1941 spoke about the role of libraries for children and

*The fostering of a love of reading, guidance in the choice of fruitful reading matter, and the gradual cultivation of a literary taste were possible in a children's library, conducted by an experienced librarian.*⁴⁶

This may use the term guidance, but there are strong implications that they are really talking about 'reader advice'. Fostering a love of reading is important, but 'guidance in the choice of fruitful reading matter' and 'cultivation of a literary taste' are not readers' advisory ideas as we understand them today. They are about providing approved reading matter rather than what someone actually wants to read. They are about closing down options rather than opening up possibilities.

NSW Library Act 1939

The 1939 report on NSW public library services⁴⁷ identifies the role of public libraries in providing both recreational reading and books for information purposes.

*Public libraries may supply reading for recreation. There is every reason why they should supply the better type of recreational reading, but their essential purpose is the supply of literature and information necessary to the progress and prosperity of the community as a whole.*⁴⁸

...

*Public libraries have been viewed in the past mainly as repositories of good literature. In English legislation early in the Nineteenth Century they were linked with museums; it was thought desirable that every town should have one in keeping with its means and size, ..., and that it should contain a choice of good reading, especially of a sort that would be instructive and improving whilst it was recreational. This is still a requirement, but modern library service has much wider functions.*⁴⁹

and, on the importance of the provision of information,

*... not only a library's function to meet the needs of the confirmed reader, and to foster a love of good literature, but also to help the man for whom reading is only a means to an end. ... It is desirable that as many as possible should be cultured and well-read; it is equally desirable that information be available; books remain the best vehicles of information, and public libraries the best means of distributing them.*⁵⁰

As noted above, the report was clear on the role of the 'trained librarian or readers' adviser' in assisting readers.⁵¹

In discussing schools of art libraries the report said

... the great majority of subscribers want only fiction of the most ephemeral kind. This is largely due to ignorance of the range and uses of informative books. Only public libraries under the direction of librarians trained to encourage better reading and to answer inquiries for information can give the community the knowledge it has lost.

...

*[schools of arts] have come to be regarded in many cases as clubs for adult recreation. No objection can be taken to the provision of recreation in this way, but when a library is associated with purely recreational activities its other functions are forgotten. The original education purpose expressed in the name "school of arts" is totally obscured. A new realisation of the educational opportunity in books requires a new institution. The public library can help in community recreation, but should not be identified solely with it.*⁵²

In discussing the Draft Library Bill, the report's authors stated their intention that

*... councils adopting the Act could either lend any fiction free of charge, or make a charge for the loan of fiction of relatively slight literary value. The intention is that they could not exclude from their libraries or impose a charge on anyone wishing to read and study in them, and that they could not refuse any resident or ratepayer the free loan of books of literary, informative and educational value.*⁵³

This intention is reflected in the NSW Library Act 1939 No. 40; whilst recreational reading is not explicitly mentioned fiction is:

(c) Free loans of certain library material to members

*Any person who is a member of the library is entitled to borrow free of charge from the library for use away from the library premises any library material of the library which has been classified by the librarian of the library as being of literary, informative or educational value or as being fiction.*⁵⁴

Post-World War II

We see cryptic hints about services, for example

*Mrs. Murray, the librarian, will help and advise readers, who should plan their winter reading now.*⁵⁵

This library is in a newsagency and the planning for winter reading starts in March. It is not clear from this very short statement as to whether this is suggestions for leisure reading, or reading for education, however, as the article was published in 1946 it is more likely to focus on reading for education.

This quote from *The Central Queensland Herald* in 1955, while not about libraries specifically, has a very positive description of the range of reading by the diversity of materials listed:

*It is taken for granted today that there should be available to the public vast quantities of diverse reading matter – books of all descriptions, from text-books to novels, from "learned" books to comics.*⁵⁶

Not all library staff took a similarly encompassing view; this was a time when the readers' advice offered in libraries was on how to fill educational gaps and comics sadly were not seen as 'reading'.

In 1961 a newspaper story stated that Penrith Library in NSW had discontinued the 'Youth' section of the library because it had found that this portion of the community was better catered for by the adult section. However

*Special reading guidance will still be given for youthful members and the library publishes a monthly bulletin "Youth" giving reading suggestions.*⁵⁷

In 1964 Professor J S Fenwick stated that

*A lack of regard for the need for adequate reading materials, and a failure to provide stimulating books, were symptoms of a society in which reading as a rewarding activity did not enjoy a very high status.*⁵⁸

Professor Fenwick also spoke about the need to consider new materials and not simply suggest books which people had enjoyed themselves as children. This is solid readers' advisory information as it is about the reader and not the library worker. That is why the concept of 'suggestion' rather than 'recommendation' is critical. Suggestion makes it easier for someone to come back to the library and say they did not like it, recommendation implies a moral judgement if you don't enjoy it, which is a concept scarily close to 'readers' advice' from the 1940s and 1950s.

Following the earlier work by Professor Fenwick, a *Canberra Times* report from 1966 looking at school libraries says:

Most important of all, the librarian should be able to make her specialised knowledge of children's literature available to her public in the form of personal reader guidance.

However the "continuous presence of the librarian on the floor, talking casually with children accustomed to her being available, interested and ready with another book" was missed in many libraries.

*In our Canberra children's libraries, reader guidance is rarely possible owing to severe staff shortages in this field.*⁵⁹

It is not clear how close the service description is to non-judgemental readers' advisory services. It may be at the self-education end of the spectrum, with 'reader advice', but from the information in this article it is not possible to know. The positive elements are that knowledgeable and interested library staff are talking with children about their reading. These articles use the term 'reader guidance', or 'informed reader guidance'⁶⁰ which is closer to the current practice of readers' advisory services than it is to the earlier practice of 'reader advice'.

It hard to know where the 'readers' advice' ends and the 'reading guidance' starts, but the description of the 'reading suggestions' can make one hopeful that there has been the start of a shift.

There were still issues about judgemental attitudes towards some kinds of recreational reading, as shown in the *Library objectives and standards* from NSW in 1959, wording which is a direct quote from the 1939 Public Library Service report:

*Public libraries may supply reading for recreation. There is every reason why they should supply the better type of recreational reading, but their essential purpose is the supply of literature and information necessary to the progress and prosperity of the community as a whole.*⁶¹

Another element of readers' advisory services is how books are promoted. In 1953 there is a very interesting column in the *Daily Advertiser*, Wagga Wagga, NSW which is the Wagga Wagga City Library book list. This lists has a range of non-fiction action and adventure titles, stating that

*the books which we feature this week demonstrate that the sense of adventure is very much alive in the minds of great men around us.*⁶²

This is very gendered language, and few of the titles are written by women, but the way these books are described demonstrates their readers' advisory appeal. The Wagga City Library book list appears to have been a regular feature in the local paper, and the different issues are written with much appeal, for example

*What better reading could you find, after a whole decade of Spartan living, than this sparkling reconstruction of the days when food meant more than mere sustenance; when there was still poetry in cooking, and a proper appreciation of its mysteries was necessary to those who lived a full life.*⁶³

And

*'Australia Speaks' and 'Australia Writes' are the two outstanding **books** in this week's collection. 'Australia Speaks' is a supplement to 'The Australian Language', written by Sidney J. Baker, and is a study of our colorful Australian slang, 'Australia Writes', edited by T. Inglis Moore, brings together the best of Australian contemporary prose, short stories, essays, articles and poetry.*⁶⁴

These regular descriptions of new books, linking them to local, national and international events show impressive passive readers' advisory skills by someone at Wagga Wagga Library in the early 1950s.

Late 20th century into the 21st century

During the 1970s to 1990s, public libraries were positioning themselves as information centres – as sources of authoritative information, as access points to the Internet and electronic resources. Loans for recreational reading remained a core service of public libraries but management and

training emphasis was placed on automation and information technology, services for children and youth, for multicultural communities and a variety of community programs. This is also a period of increasing levels of education within the community, with free tertiary education implemented in 1974.

Review of papers about public libraries in *The Australian Library Journal* during this period reveals preoccupation with funding (especially after publication of the Horton report⁶⁵), fees-for-service, information technology, services to the aged, and library buildings.

Margaret Isaacs in her 1987 paper 'Fiction: a neglected aspect of library service' uses the expression 'readers' advising' and points out that readers' advising on fiction for children and young adults is 'generally of a high standard among librarians who have specialised in this area'.⁶⁶ She is possibly the first to identify the absence of training for library staff in providing similar services for adults, in spite of the fact that 'reference questions and sources of information' are studied with great thoroughness' in library schools.⁶⁷ She proposes that

*...reform is needed in training courses ... to ensure that fiction in libraries, and particularly popular fiction, is treated as professionally and competently as other materials. Public librarians need to be widely read in fiction and well-informed in areas where they do not read. Such a major component of our service deserves a major share of professional interest and expertise.*⁶⁸

However, it was not until some sixteen years later that systematic training in 'readers' advising' began, with the State Library of NSW *Rewarding Reading* program (see below).

In 1990 Cathrine Harboe-Ree, in writing about Victorian public libraries, expressed the view that '...after a number of years in public library management, I am now prepared to argue the case that the best librarians are also those who are the most addicted to reading'.⁶⁹ Most readers' advisers today would agree with her.

We think there is no doubt that many public library staff did read widely and did provide excellent readers' advisory service to adults—they just didn't write about it much at the time. Readers' advisory service was patchy and dependent on the interests and skills of individuals, rather than being an area of professional practice that received much management or educational attention.

However, late in the 20th century and into the 21st there are signs that the related area of promotion and display (what we might today call 'passive readers' advisory') began to gain attention. A 1988 survey of marketing in librarianship courses in Australia revealed that technicians courses included techniques for display of materials, and production of signs and brochures.⁷⁰ Later still we see retail techniques applied to library displays, re-organisation of collections into genre groupings or themed rooms including both fiction and non-fiction, in order to make collections more visible, accessible and appealing.

In 1998, a view harking back to the days of 'improving' readers (and similar to the views of Dilevko and Magowan⁷¹) was expressed in *The Australian Library Journal* by Miloslaw Kruk who deplored the 'trivialisation of and commercialisation of libraries, schools and universities' and warned that this would result in the 'disappearance of a civil society'.⁷² There appears to be little, if any, contemporary support in Australia for this view.

From the late 1990s we see papers on the promotion of adult reading and related areas of professional practice (displays, reading groups, promotions and so), and book reviews about readers' advisory topics begin to appear in the Australian library literature—particularly in journals such as

APLIS: Australasian Libraries and Information Services, and as presentations at public library conferences.⁷³

Significant milestones since 2004 in Australia are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key points in the revival of readers' advisory work in Australia

1987	Isaacs' <i>ALJ</i> article concerning adult fiction services and lack of training ⁷⁴
1990s–2000s	Increasing evidence in literature of interest in adult leisure reading & related topics; more emphasis on displays & promotion
2003–04	Development of <i>Rewarding Reading</i> program
2004 to date	<i>Rewarding Reading</i> systematic training program for NSW public library staff; numerous workshops delivered throughout Australia and NZ
2004 to date	Increased emphasis on active and passive readers' advisory activity, evidenced by photos on library websites and social media sites (e.g., Flickr, Pinterest); special promotions for Library Lovers Day (14 February, also known as 'St Valentine's Day') and other occasions, and increasing numbers of articles and book reviews in the Australian literature.
2006	aliaREAD discussion list established for readers' advisory discussions Nancy Pearl visits Australia; SLNSW sponsors visit to Australia of Rachel Van Riel of 'Opening the Book' (UK) @ Your Library campaign launched ⁷⁵ ; Library Lovers' Day instituted ⁷⁶
2006–07	Formation of the NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group; establishment of its wiki for sharing resources and information
2008	NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group Annual Seminars commence with ' <i>Romancing your readers</i> '. These seminars attract over 100 people each year
2008	National seminar, <i>Reading Critical: developing readers in Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne April 2008</i> , with numerous papers by Australian, NZ and UK authors on readers' advisory/reader development practice. ⁷⁷ Advocated planning for a National Year of Reading
2009	<i>Reality check – non-fiction readers' advisory</i> (NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group Annual Seminar)
March 2010	<i>Murder in the Metcalfe</i> (NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group Annual Seminar)
October 2010	Victoria adopts the UK <i>Frontline</i> online program (developed by Opening the Book) to train library staff in reader development work.
2010–11	Twitter Reading Group established by the NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group; now the Read Watch Play Twitter Reading Group and blog ⁷⁸
2010 onwards	Increasing use of social media for sharing readers' advisory resources and practice among practitioners, and by libraries to reach their customers
2011	<i>Dragons in the Metcalfe</i> (NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group Annual Seminar) NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group wins the 2011 Marketing Awards for NSW Public Libraries, Social Media category, for <i>Readit2011</i> , a Twitter reading group; award sponsored by <i>Good Reading</i> magazine
2012	National Year of Reading 2012 <i>History in the Dixon</i> (NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group Annual Seminar) National training competencies 'CULINL501A – Promote literature and reading'
2013	<i>Read your way around the world</i> (NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group Annual Seminar)
2014	<i>Horror at the Metcalfe</i> (NSW Readers' Advisory Working Group Annual Seminar)

Training in readers' advisory practice and techniques

Systematic training for readers' advisers in Australia began with the development of the *Rewarding Reading* program in 2003–04. This program sprang from an initiative of the then Country Public Libraries Association of NSW South East Zone; its development (by Libraries Alive! Pty Ltd after a

selection process) was funded by a grant from the Library Council of New South Wales; and it has been delivered as a train-the-trainer program to public library staff in NSW since 2004. It has also been delivered in train-the-trainer and shorter formats throughout Australia and New Zealand by Libraries Alive! under licence from the State Library of NSW. Its role as a catalyst for the New Zealand Best Sellers program has been acknowledged⁷⁹ though Best Sellers has more explicit emphasis on the '*retail librarianship doctrine and its elevated promotion throughout Best Sellers represents a major and deliberate point of difference from its predecessor [i.e. *Rewarding Reading*]*'.⁸⁰ The history and development of *Rewarding Reading* are documented elsewhere.⁸¹

Rewarding Reading is reader-focused and

- encourages conversations about books and reading
- validates readers' adviser activity and the experience of recreational reading as having value for both library staff and library customers
- develops self-confidence in participants, based on peer assessment, information-sharing and thorough knowledge of readers' advisory reference sources
- promotes proactivity, enthusiasm and innovation among library staff
- has a domino effect through the train-the-trainer model, as participants later pass on their learning to their own colleagues.

Rewarding Reading has been a significant catalyst for increased emphasis on adult leisure reading services and readers' advisory practice in NSW, other parts of Australia and New Zealand.

The activities of the NSW Readers' Advisory Group with its annual seminars and social media initiatives have without doubt stimulated interest and innovation in recreational services provided by public libraries.

The National Year of Reading 2012 promoted reading and associated library services throughout Australia.

In 2003 when *Rewarding Reading* was conceived we could find little evidence of explicit readers' advisory content in library courses, apart from occasional mentions in reference and information units. Since 2012 a unit of competency 'Promote literature and reading' in the Library, Information and Cultural Services Training Package (CUL11) has been available. This unit

*describes the performance outcomes, skills and knowledge required to promote literature and reading in a wide variety of contexts. Particular emphasis is on promoting literacy by creating environments that provide access to relevant and attractive reading material in a variety of formats to suit a range of ages and reading levels.*⁸²

At the time of writing this unit is available in TAFE courses in most states and territories.⁸³

From 2010 Victorian public libraries have used the *Frontline* online training program from the United Kingdom.⁸⁴

Conclusion

From the practitioner point of view we have tracked the development of the concept of 'readers' advice' and 'readers' advisory', commenting on changes in meaning and interpretation in public libraries in Australia over time. The service has changed from one which is judgemental about reading, preferring only reading which will allegedly 'improve' the reader with no elements of enjoyment, to a non-judgemental, enjoyable and more diverse service including reading, watching,

listening and playing, where each experience may change the reader. It is a much broader service, reader-focused, a service with an inclusive approach, acknowledging a diversity of reading experiences and enjoyment.

Readers' advisory/reader development work in Australian public libraries is now a vibrant and rewarding stream of professional practice which has contributed to the range and quality of public library services and their ongoing relevance to 21st century readers.

Notes

¹ This is the definition used in the *Rewarding Reading* training program developed for the State Library of New South Wales.

² Joyce G. Saricks, *Readers' advisory service in the public library*, 3rd edition, Chicago, American Library Association, 2005, p. 1. Her definition (first promulgated in 1989 in the first edition of her book): '... a patron-centred library service for adult leisure readers. A successful readers' advisory service is one in which knowledgeable, non-judgemental staff help fiction and non-fiction readers with their leisure reading needs. ... Readers' advisors and proponents of the service subscribe wholeheartedly to the philosophy that reading has intrinsic value.'

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