

Readers Advisory Basics

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SPEAKERS

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Hi there. I'm Kimberly Hirsh, a PhD candidate at the UNC Chapel Hill School of Information in library science, as well as a former school librarian. And today, I'm going to introduce you to some readers advisory basics. Here's our agenda for this particular lecture. First, we'll define readers advisory, then talk about articulating a books appeal, and conducting the reader's advisory interview. So first, let's talk about what readers advisory is. These definitions come from the book *Readers Advisory in the Public Library*, or I think it's *Readers Advisory Service in the Public Library*, by Joyce Saricks. So readers advisory is a patron centered library service for leisure readers. This means that you are going to do this with the patron's interests in mind. From the 1920s through the 1960s, when readers advisory first started and was continuing on for a few decades, it was mostly focused on providing continuing education. It was didactic and more about making sure that patrons engaged in lifelong learning. But modern readers advisory is about supporting their recreational reading; they may choose for that leisure reading to read informational texts, nonfiction, that would help them learn. But that's their choice. It's not that the librarian is trying to impose that on them. Readers advisory is non-judgmental. As I mentioned, in the past, librarians were trying to achieve a specific aim of moving readers towards being more educated. And so what they would do is they would have meetings with readers. And they would also curate reading lists with the idea of moving them toward classics. So these were judgments they were making about which texts were the right texts, or the good texts, or high quality texts. The other thing that they would do, and I find this laughable now, but it's also very sad and kind of upsetting is that they would create lists that were designed for specific types of patrons that kind of might fit a particular stereotype. And that would contain reading that librarians thought would

be the right book for that kind of patron. So they might meet someone who is an unskilled worker and be like, Oh, well, this person should read John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* because it's about unskilled workers. And of course, now, you may or may not want a book about something that represents your life. And it's not really the librarian's business, whether that's what you're looking for or not, unless you make it their business and a librarian who met a patron that they perceive them as a criminal in the making, would then recommend to that patron Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Modern readers advisory is not like this. It's all about finding out what elements of books appeal to a reader. And then helping them find other books that will have a similar appeal and that they will enjoy. It's about what they are interested in, not what we as library professionals think is best for them. And finally, it's driven by the belief that reading has intrinsic value. So as I said, we're not trying to push particular books on anyone, we're not trying to push books related to some aspect of life on anyone. And we also aren't looking to improve people's exposure to any kind of particular text to what you know, people worry about the Great Western canon going away. It's not librarians' job in reader's advisory to try and keep that going. The idea is that you want to find out what does this person enjoy? And how can I get them more of that? They don't need to have a reason besides reading to do the reading. So I mentioned that we're going to find out what books appeal to readers. And before you can start trying to suggest books to readers, you have to shift how you think about books, so that you can identify the ways that appeal shows up in them. So appeal refers to how a book feels as opposed to what it's about. There are a lot of books that might be about the same thing, but reading them might feel very different. So we're going to work through an example now with my favorite book that I read last year, *Mexican Gothic*. It's a New York Times bestseller. It was a very sort of buzzy book, people talked about it a lot. First of all, appeal is not subject - subject headings. So I went to the service NovelistPlus which I'll talk more about in a little bit, and found their record for *Mexican Gothic* and pulled out the subject headings that they indicated for it. And so here they are: socialites, family estates, family secrets, newlyweds, cousins, British in Mexico, rural life, intrigue, nightmares, patriarchy, young women, eugenics, fungi, and families. Those are all accurate descriptors of stuff you might find in this book. But I have no idea looking at those whether or not this is a book for me. So those are informative if you're trying to find books that have any of those features. But it's not as useful for trying to suggest a book to a reader. Similarly, appeal is not simply a genre. This book is both Gothic fiction and historical fantasy. It meets all of the characteristics you might find in a checklist for either of those. But just knowing that it is that kind of book, again, isn't really detailed enough to let me know if I would like this book in particular, I know I like Gothic fiction a lot of the time. But I don't know why this is Gothic other than obviously, it's in the title. So I need more information to know if this is for me, and if I should be suggesting it to someone else. So when we talk about appeal, there are a lot of different potential story elements you could include. But the most recent iteration of these are put out by the service NovelistPlus, which is a reader's advisory tool that you should have access to. If you are at Rutgers, through the State Library, you can check in with Dr. Threats about how to get access to that if you aren't familiar with it already. And appeal consists of these specific story elements according to NoveList's guide: pace,

storyline, tone, character, and writing style. So now we'll talk through some of these for Mexican Gothic and how NoveList talks about them, and how I might talk about them as someone who read it and might suggest this book to another reader. First pacing, this is the rate at which the story unfolds. NoveList doesn't have a pacing marked for Mexican Gothic because they only use pacing if it's a really standout feature. But I think it's worth talking about because some people really are going to care about how a book is paced. Mexican Gothic is not a fast-paced book; it's more deliberately paced, it sort of slowly reveals things to you over the course of the book, and then it begins to reveal them in quicker succession as you get close towards the climax of the book. It's not something where an inciting incident, you know, happens on page 10. And then you're off to the races. Storyline tells you about the book's focus and structure. This is a very big category of appeal. And if you look at NoveList's Guide, which I will make sure you have a link to for how to talk about books, which includes an extensive vocabulary, this is one of the longest lists of options. The two that they have pointed out in their record for Mexican Gothic are that it's own voices so the author Sylvia Moreno-Garcia is Mexican Canadian, the main character Noemi is herself Mexican, there are a lot of other characters in it who are Mexican as well. There's her cousin, her father, some people she meets in a village where her cousin lives. And then it's also intricately plotted. There's a lot of stuff going on, there are a lot of sort of pieces of a puzzle that fit together. And those are, as I said, talking about pacing revealed a little bit at a time and sort of callback to each other. So you might get to a point and be like, Oh, this reminds me of earlier in the book, am I remembering what happened there correctly? And then you might find something and be like, Oh, wait, I thought what's happening then was really this. So there are a lot of moving pieces to keep track of. Then tone is the feeling that the book evokes. And this is another really long list from NoveList. For Mexican Gothic as you might expect, given its name, it is creepy, menacing, and atmospheric. It takes place in this big English manor house that has been set up near a rural Mexican town. There is a lot of stuff in cemeteries and portraits on the walls and the house is kind of old and smells bad and gross. And there's a lot of like candlelight dinners and nobody can get to a telephone for some reason. So lots of that kind of thing. And then character. This is for readers who are particularly interested in character. There are some readers who might not be very interested in what the characters in their books are like; they might be more plot-driven readers. But for readers who do care, there are a number of different ways you can talk about the kinds of characters in books. In Mexican Gothic, NoveList has labeled this culturally diverse because it does have a Mexican protagonist and many other Mexican characters living in Mexico and a strong female. So Noemi herself is a socialite who is pulled away from her social life and her college to go investigate what's going on with her cousin who has married a wealthy Englishman, and now lives in his big manor house, far away from Mexico City where Noemi herself lives. And Noemi is the one who has to figure out what's going on. And she is in fact, very strong in terms of her personality, and she also is a well developed character with a lot of different characteristics as opposed to just being a stereotype or a cardboard cutout or existing to serve some other character's storyline. Writing style is another element. And this can refer to the complexity of language, the level of detail and there are some other features that if you check out

that NoveList guide you will see in there, and Mexican Gothic is compelling. So this is the kind of book where though things are revealed sort of deliberately and a little bit at a time, there's always something that if you're the kind of reader this book is going to work for will edge you on to keep reading. So that's an example of one type of writing style. There are a bunch of other considerations that you might take into account when you are talking with readers about books or thinking about books yourself, including elements of setting like time and place. So Mexican Gothic is set in the 1950s, which is sort of unusual for a gothic, a lot of those tend to be either Victorian or even older. And then place: it is set in Mexico, a little bit in Mexico City, but mostly in rural Mexico. And that does come into play. Theme is another one that is really big. And it's so big, I struggle to go into it now. But the best way to think about it, I think would be similar to tropes. So things like found family or friends to lovers. Or, you know, we all team up and work together, things like that. And NoveList can provide an extensive set of those actually sorted by genre. And Mexican Gothic. One of the themes is sort of dealing with colonial oppression like colonialism, this English family that has moved here and set up a, I believe it's a mine. It's been a while since I read the book, but a mine in the rural town, and they are controlling the wealth there. But they have come from outside and are imposing this on the Mexican families in the town. You might also consider titles that are similar, and the genre or sub genre that the book would fit in. You aren't going to know all of the elements that you might need to describe any kind of book. And you aren't going to know all the books that might help you find the right book to suggest to a reader. So with the help of the NoveList tool, which I highly recommend you use as you're doing readers advisory, if you have access to it. You can also use their guide for free whether or not your library has access to the actual NoveList database and service, the guide *The Secret Language of Books*, and I will make sure that you have a link to that. I strongly recommend exploring that because it goes into much greater depth on all of these appeal factors. So I'd like you to take a moment to pause this video. Think about a book that you enjoyed, and try identifying some of its appeal factors. And then a couple of other things you can think about as you think about books when you're suggesting them to readers is other books like a given book, and how that book fits into its genre, whether it is a prime example of expected elements of the genre, or if it might be mixing a couple of genres or has just one sub genre that it fits into. Just think about those things to the extent that you can with a book you enjoyed recently. Okay so now you know how to think about books it's time to figure out how to talk about books and one of the ways that you'll talk about books to patrons at libraries is doing a reader's advisory interview. If you have already learned about doing a reference interview it has some things in common with that but it also has some features that are a little different. When we talk to people about books outside of a professional context and someone wants to talk to us about a book we might just say like "Oh, what kind of books do you like?" If we're getting to know someone for the first time, that's a great way to make a new friend but it's not necessarily a great way to figure out how to suggest books to people. So here's the question that will help you get started talking with patrons about books: can you tell me about a book you've read and enjoyed? And the reason that we ask this question is because what a patron says about the book will reveal to you what is important to know about the book. So for

example with Mexican Gothic, one reader might really love that it focuses on a Mexican young woman with ambitions of becoming an anthropologist working to help her family and another person might appreciate that but find it much more important that it's set in a spooky house and it's an old English country house and there's a mysterious cemetery and a lot of family members who live in the house who act kind of strange. You might get those two descriptions of the same book from different readers, so what you want to do after you've asked this book, as you're listening, listen for the patrons specifically mentioning story elements. So if i say to you, "Mexican Gothic is about this young woman Noemi who is very ambitious and wants to be an anthropologist and has to go help her cousin," that tells you that i'm interested in potentially strong women, ambitious characters, family. If i say, "Oh, it's this really classic Gothic novel; it's set in an old manor and it has this weird thing going on where there's like this succession of wives for this guy and it's a lot of mystery trying to figure out what's happening" - if i'm telling you that, which admittedly is pretty vague, you can still get a sense that it's more the atmosphere and the tone that i'm looking for you to find for me in my next read. If i say to you, "Well, it's great because it's got this strong character in the lead and then she goes to this creepy place but what's really remarkable about it is instead of this sort of normal gothic thing she is reckoning with the history of colonialism imposed by this family upon the town they're in now," you know that that's the most important thing about the book to me and so that theme is most important. So you want to listen for those kinds of elements and then after you've listened you want to try and suggest at least three books that the patron might like. We focus on suggesting instead of recommending because recommending sort of has a connotation of "I've vetted this book personally and I think you should read it," which often might not be the case for you. So you might say "This book seems like it might be similar," and again you're not going to know all the books in the world so you can use resources like NoveList and there are some other resources as well that I will make notes of and make sure you have information about to help you find out what those books might be. The thing about NoveList in particular that's really nice is that they have an appeal factor search so you can actually find the book, see if they mentioned one of the appeals that NoveList has identified in the book, click a link, and it will show you a bunch of other books like that. And I'll make sure you also have a link to a webinar from NoveList that explains how to do that. And then before you close out the interview, make sure you ask for feedback. You can tell them to let you know how it goes or say you want to find out how they liked the books or if they liked the books. You want to keep this an ongoing relationship because it's valuable for people to know that they can come to you as a library professional for this kind of advice and information and also because that will help you sort of self-assess and see how your reading advisory muscles are growing. So as I mentioned, you can actually use NoveList Plus to search by story elements and find similar books. And they do have demos and tutorials on how to do that, that I will make sure you can find. Alright, so now it's time to practice. Go ahead and if you have the time now, pause this and if you can get in touch with somebody, ask them to tell you about a book they enjoyed. You can talk to someone you know, if you've got a roommate who lives with you or a family member, you can text somebody, you can go try to find people on Reddit asking for advice about

what the next book they should read is. See if you can get someone to tell you about a book they enjoyed or find where someone has talked about a book they enjoyed. Listen for appeal factors and see if you can find three books to suggest to them. Okay, so just to review what we've talked about in this lecture: Reader's advisory is a patron driven service, in which library professionals help patrons find leisure reading materials. Books' appeal can be articulated via specific story elements, such as pacing, tone, characterization. And library professionals can use their knowledge of appeal and of readers advisory tools like NoveList Plus, to suggest reading materials to patrons. Alright, thank you. I will have more for you soon.