In the Eye of the Beholder

Readers' Advisory from a Cataloging Perspective

Victoria A. Caplinger, Guest Columnist

***Victoria Caplinger** is a Cataloging Supervisor and Readers' Advisory Specialist at NoveList, and leads the team that adds appeal factors to the NoveList database. She also reviews for* Library Journal*, has been a judge for the Audie Awards, and is currently serving on ALA's Notable Books Council.*

*Correspondence to this column should be addressed to **Laurel Tarulli**, Dalhousie University, School of Information Management, Halifax, Nova Scotia; email: laureltarulli@yahoo.com.*

We often focus our professional attention on what happens within libraries on libraries similar to our own. Looking to other public libraries, we seek inspiration, new ideas, and innovative approaches to enhancing our own readers' advisory service. Rather than taking a traditional approach, this article seeks to explore the role cataloging and the cataloger can play in enhancing readers' services. Victoria Caplinger, cataloging supervisor at NoveList, explores how NoveList, working together with leading professionals in our field, created appeals terminology for inclusion in bibliographic records; in essence, creating a new controlled vocabulary focusing on readers' needs for library catalogs. Throughout this article, Ms. Caplinger explores the many ways cataloging professionals and NoveList enhance, support, and promote a new level of remote readers' services in public libraries.—*Editor*

Extending the boundaries of readers' advisory (RA) into online environments is an increasingly important topic in the RA field, as changing technology and new frameworks for library service make clear. As Barry Trott says, "The Library 2.0 movement is centered on using technology to build a more user-focused library and to promote the development and expansion of communities into the virtual world."[1] Where the library goes, readers' advisory service must follow. This topic surfaces in a number of contexts, from discussions of form-based readers' advisory, to online book communities such as Goodreads or LibraryThing, to the importance of library websites and catalogs in connecting with our users.

I was fortunate enough to attend the Public Library Association (PLA) 2012 conference in Philadelphia and heard a number of conversations about the role of the catalog as an arena for presenting library patrons with RA service. In the *Readers' Advisory Toolkit* panel, Neal Wyatt encouraged her audience to "saturate the bib record" with RA material; when Bill Ptacek was asked in the Readers as Leaders session where the future of library service lay, he said of the library catalog, "It's our theory of knowledge, but can be so much more" (Presentations given at PLA, Philadelphia, PA, 2012). Trott notes that "the library catalog is the one place where almost all library users interact with the library at some point."[2] When considering the importance of the catalog—how many user holds are placed remotely, and how patrons visit the catalog even more than the library website—it's exciting to think about new possibilities related to the way we share and display our readers' advisory material.

One under-explored avenue of readers' advisory potential lies in the art of cataloging, particularly as it relates to

fiction and narrative nonfiction. In her 2007 article, "An RA Big Think," Neal Wyatt quotes Ike Pulver saying how great it would be if we "could classify books—fiction especially—by 'feeling' rather than by subject, or adjectivally (big, fast, exciting, intricate, thought-provoking) instead of nominally (horse, houses, shops, satellites, cheese)."[3] In a 2007 post to Fiction-L, Jessica Zellers notes that "it's nearly impossible to get good results by searching for 'grim tone and lush prose.'"[4] Approaching books in this subjective manner is a topic that often arises in articles about social tagging but far less often, if at all, in the context of cataloging with controlled vocabularies. Neil Hollands and Jessica Moyer put forward the need for better-defined appeal terminology, stating that "definitions within our vocabulary of appeal need to become more exact, and broad categories of appeal must be broken down into component parts. . . . A more exact vocabulary will pave the way for better communication between professionals and open the door to classification systems that go beyond content-focused subject headings."[5] This impulse to standardize and quantify what is essentially subjective territory is a daunting challenge, but one that is also extremely exciting for its potential to open a new avenue of communication with library patrons.

Echoing the wish that appeal could somehow be applied in a more detailed yet uniform way, many users and professional advisors of NoveList had long been asking us to add appeal factors to our book records. In the spring of 2009, NoveList formed a team to develop a strategy for doing just that. As both a cataloger and avid reader, I was asked to head the project. The process that our team developed, and the intellectual ground that we covered, will be the focus of this paper. This process may serve as a model that other librarians and catalogers can adapt to add this type of information in their catalogs. Our overarching goal, as voiced by NoveList founder Duncan Smith during a staff meeting, is to "develop an appeal vocabulary that will resonate with readers, even if they might not have thought of it themselves."

When beginning our research on appeal factors, we found several conceptual models that agreed in many key points but also varied in application. In the second edition of her landmark title, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, Joyce Saricks identifies six distinct appeal factors: Pacing, Characterization, Storyline, Tone/Mood, Frame/Setting, and Style/Language.[6] In *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Nonfiction*, Neal Wyatt discusses eight: Pacing, Characterization, Storyline, Details, Learning/Experiencing, Language, Setting, and Tone.[7] At the time we were conducting our own investigation, Nancy Pearl was developing her "doorways" concept, which identifies four main pathways to uncovering a book's interest for a reader: Story, Character, Setting, and Language.[8]

Advice and guidance provided by both Neal Wyatt and Joyce Saricks were critical to our appeal discussions. They were very generous with their time and knowledge and willingly sat through conversations that were at turns invigorating, circuitous, stimulating, and exhausting. In making decisions about our own appeal factor categories, we needed to balance a number of considerations. Presentation in a user interface was one concern—having too many categories identified separately could be overwhelming to users. On the other hand, we wanted to be cautious about collapsing too many different appeal concepts together.

We ultimately identified four appeal breakouts: Storyline, Pace, Tone, and Writing Style (which includes language and details). These appeal categories display in the user view of NoveList along with our Subject, Location, and Genre headings. Storyline incorporates Saricks' and Pearl's distinction between character and plot-driven stories, as well as other terms that help readers find books with the overall structure they are looking for. Pace is the rate at which the story unfolds for the reader. Here, we only chose to identify books that were clearly fast or more slowly paced; Neal Wyatt indicated that pace is really only an active appeal factor when it falls at one end or the other of the spectrum—nobody seeks out a "medium-paced" book. Tone is where we focused most of our initial energy, as this reaches the emotional core of the book. This category also includes terms that talk about the setting of the book, basing this decision on Joyce Saricks' statement that "setting as an element of appeal really means background and tone, not geographic place."[9] We deliberated about including our Richly Detailed appeal term (which incorporates Neal Wyatt's appeal of Details) in our Writing Style category, which also contains terms discussing language and style. It's great to indicate that a book includes a distinctive level of detail, but ideally, users might want to know what subjects it covers. In the future, we would like to tie our Richly Detailed appeal term to relevant subject headings—are there many details about wine and wine-making, or antiques, or perhaps forensic science and the fine art of the autopsy?

Once we decided on overall categories and discussed individual terms, the ambiguity at the heart of much appeal terminology quickly became apparent. As Stover says, "conducting a successful readers' advisory conversation with a reader can be akin to slashing one's way through adjectival vines as tangled as 'well written,' 'good story,' and 'not boring.'"[10] This is murky territory indeed, and we catalogers were more than a little nervous about venturing into it. After all, applying subject headings is a different matter entirely: either a book is about vampires, or it isn't (unless it's about werevampires, which is something else altogether!) For the most part, however, subject analysis keeps us comfortably in the black-and-white world, generally avoiding too many shades of grey. Appeal, on the other hand, depends not only on the book itself, but upon a reader's response to it. As Smith says, "All readers rewrite every story they read . . . in other words, the reading of a novel is as much a creative act as the writing of it."[11] While some authors may balk at this statement, there is certainly an element of truth in it.

When developing a controlled appeal vocabulary, we researched both print and online resources and spent time looking at individual titles and analyzing appeal terms found in reviews. Standardizing the language of appeal enough to allow catalogers to apply headings consistently has been hugely

challenging; readers, book reviewers, and librarians all talk about books in very different ways. All of us sometimes use the same words to mean very different things. What is *heartwarming* to one person may be *saccharine* to another. In the course of reviewing some of the documents that our team sent her, Joyce Saricks warned us away from words that depend too much on what the reader wants or is looking for, writing of the term "satisfying" that it could in some cases mean "heartwarming" but "might be creepy too, if that's what you're in the mood for. A weasel word, I fear." We also sometimes use a number of different words to mean essentially the same thing. For example, how does one distinguish between *chilling*, *eerie*, and *creepy*? The NoveList appeal team soon realized that for the purposes of cataloging, we would need to group similar terms together. Neal Wyatt advised us when choosing words to select the "bluntest instrument" for the task: what will be most clear to users? She reflected that when writing a review, many words could be used to draw out the very finest points of an appeal concept, but that when including this information in a catalog record, we needed to settle on a single term.

When first outlining a process for adding appeal terminology to the books in our database, we decided to start by working with a list of top-priority authors. Looking at the whole corpus of an author's work seemed a natural strategy, since we could utilize resources informing us about the author's style and the appeal at play in many of his or her books, as well as increase efficiency by adding terms to a number of books at once. When reading reviews in greater depth, however, we came to realize that professional reviewers sometimes contradict each other in assessing a book's appeal. At times, the critics are also much harsher than the reading public: some very prolific authors, such as Stephen King, often take a beating in the professional review journals, but their books are still enthusiastically enjoyed by readers. In order to present the most balanced and holistic view of a book's appeal, we needed to take reader as well as professional reviews into account. We also made a conscious decision to not call out "negative" book appeal: if a review complains about cardboard characters or hackneyed prose, we don't, for the most part, highlight these things.

Many RA experts have commented on the relationship between appeal terminology and reader tagging and reviewing of books. Trott states, "As librarians learn more about how readers respond to books through discussion and through analysis of reader tagging of titles and authors, readers' advisory practice needs to incorporate these new concepts into its vocabulary of appeal."[12] Yesha Naik observes this phenomenon of RA as it is practiced outside library walls, saying "now online communities like Goodreads are reversing this—readers are talking, in gloriously messy detail, about books in a way that uses appeal terms, but goes back to that elemental way of talking about books that avid readers have."[13] Stover observes that "our own vocabularies and terms are changing as well. Library staff are beginning to use descriptors that our patrons understand better. The more we share the vocabulary of reading appeal, whether it is in person or online, the more connected our readers are to libraries, books, authors, publishers, and each other."[14]

In the process of attempting to capture (indeed, at times, to "stalk") a book's appeal, we routinely consult multiple sources, going beyond both personal knowledge and professional reviews, in an attempt to find where the pulse of a book lies. All of this is in the interest of approaching a shared view of a book's appeal, which will be accurate for the largest possible number of readers. Neal Wyatt has been an enthusiastic advocate of having users' responses play an important part in the presentation of appeal to the public. In the earliest days of this project, Wyatt reassured our sometimes-nervous cataloging team that, while we would not get it right 100 percent of the time, the beauty of the endeavor lay in the attempt. Wyatt felt that in embarking upon such an ultimately subjective project, we should not only be receptive to, but actively solicit, user feedback. User response to our appeal terms would enable us to correct those cases where we didn't get it right the first time.

This brings to mind the challenge that we also faced as catalogers of becoming more fluid and flexible in our work, not just in terms of venturing into such subjective territory, but also in how open we are to changing approaches and terminology. In a recent genre conversation sponsored by the ALA RUSA/CODES Readers' Advisory Research and Trends Committee, David Wright sent an appeal to librarians to work together and do some useful tagging:

> I would love to see libraries . . . find a way to get our acts together a bit and do some collective genre tagging projects in our catalogs. I'm not interested in developing elaborate taxonomies or carefully constructed thesauri, or replicating the bureaucratic structures of cataloging consortiums, which would defeat the purpose—but to settle on some useful fiction and non-fiction subgenres and other terms and divvy them up into multi-system teams—a "street fiction" team, for instance, or "true crime" team—just think how much good stuff we could do. The public hasn't really stepped in to fill the gap—our catalogs may just be too far behind Amazon and Goodreads, etc., to become the preferred online literary hangouts—but we can at least make them better.[15]

This is a wonderful idea, but one aspect of Wright's comment points to a possible perception of catalogers and the cataloging infrastructure as being at heart inflexible and bureaucratic. Tarulli writes of the division that she perceives between "frontline readers' advisory staff and backroom librarians" that "collaborating can potentially provide us with new ways to utilize the skills of both disciplines and help not only those patrons who browse within our physical libraries, but also those who never step within our walls."[16] In the quote above, Wright is asking for the flexibility that comes with tagging but with the standardization that arises from a controlled vocabulary. Responses from cataloging librarians during this email exchange indicated a desire and willingness

to work with RA staff to better meet patron needs. The potential that can be realized by opening up and broadening this RA/cataloging conversation is vast.

Adding appeal to a book record augments standard cataloging information on genres and subjects, and makes it possible for users to conduct appeal-based searches. While subject and genre headings let readers know what a book is about and whether they *might* enjoy it, the addition of appeal factors can be the tipping point in helping readers make that choice. Take Margaret Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* as an example. Subject headings let users know that the book is set in Canada in the 1940s and that family secrets and relationships between sisters are important to the story—all good information. However, adding appeal factors to the mix also lets readers know that the book is character-driven, bleak, haunting, and written in a lyrically complex style. With this kind of information before them, readers are given a whole new set of tools to help them make the determination about whether this is a book they want to read, and if a reader has read and enjoyed this book, then he or she could search for another bleak, lyrical novel and find a whole host of new reading options that a subject heading search alone would never have uncovered.

Barry Trott writes that nothing "is more critical to the future success of readers' advisory than the connection between RA service and the library catalog."[17] There are many interesting directions in which this can be taken. In discussing design and format considerations with relation to appeal, Neal Wyatt writes, "this new area of exploration will introduce more unique terms and ideas into the appeal discussion as we struggle to redefine the very idea of narrative at a time when story is increasingly format-dependent."[18] At NoveList, in addition to our print appeal vocabulary, we've been working on two format-based appeal vocabularies: one built around illustration (both for picture books and graphic novels), and one on the special appeal factors associated with audiobooks. Other possibilities include developing a method of controlled tagging, as David Wright suggests, perhaps even making use of user tags and implementing a controlled vocabulary on top of them to maximize the retrieval of items.

We have tended to think about the catalog as an inventory control tool, but with emerging technologies it now has the potential to become an information resource as well. As the capabilities of our library catalogs evolve, one could argue that our very classification systems are at a crossroads.

Cataloging has traditionally focused on describing the content of a book, but by incorporating appeal factors into our cataloging lexicon, it is possible to describe the *experience* of the book for the reader as well. Our patrons will be better served when they have access to both kinds of classification: the descriptive and the experiential. This is all tremendously exciting new ground for catalogers to explore and a rich field of possibility both for readers' advisory and what we present to users in our library catalogs.

References

1. Kaite Mediatore Stover, "Stalking the Wild Appeal Factor: Readers' Advisory and Social Networking Sites," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 243.
2. Laurel Tarulli, "Readers' Services and the Library Catalog: Coming of Age Fiction? Or Non-Fiction?" *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 115.
3. Neal Wyatt, "An RA Big Think," *Library Journal* 132, no. 12 (2007): 40.
4. Jessica Zellers, email message to Fiction-L discussion list, March 25, 2007.
5. Neil Hollands and Jessica E. Moyer, "The Future of Readers' Advisory," in *Research-Based Readers' Advisory*, ed. Jessica E. Moyer (Chicago: American Library Association, 2008), 251.
6. Joyce G. Saricks, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2009), 17–23.
7. Neal Wyatt, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Nonfiction* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007), 10.
8. Wyatt, "An RA Big Think," 43.
9. Joyce G. Saricks, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2005), 59.
10. Stover, 243–44.
11. Jessica E. Moyer, "Adult Fiction Reading: A Literature Review of Readers' Advisory Services, Adult Fiction Librarianship, and Fiction Readers," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2005): 224.
12. Barry Trott, "Building on a Firm Foundation: Readers' Advisory Over the Next Twenty-Five Years," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2008): 134.
13. Yesha Naik, "Finding Good Reads on Goodreads," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 323.
14. Stover, 246.
15. David Wright, email message to ALA RUSA/CODES Readers' Advisory Research and Trends Committee genre discussion list, December 4, 2012.
16. Tarulli, 116, 117.
17. Ibid, 115.
18. Wyatt, "An RA Big Think," 41.