Stalking the Wild Appeal Factor

Readers' Advisory and Social Networking Sites

**Kaite Mediatore Stover,
Guest Columnist**

*Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to **Barry Trott**, Adult Services Director, Williamsburg Regional Library, 7770 Croaker Rd., Williamsburg, VA 23188; email: btrott@mail.wr.org.*

***Kaite Mediatore Stover** is Head of Readers' Services, Kansas City (Mo.) Public Library.*

Readers' advisory (RA) services have always been about building a two-way line of communication between a reader and the readers' advisor. The whole premise of contemporary RA practice rests on the idea that the advisor comes up with suggestions for a reader by listening carefully to how that reader experienced a book or author that they particularly enjoyed. Armed with that understanding, the advisor can then make reading suggestions that go beyond the basic matches of genre or subject. In this way, RA service has always been a "2.0" service. 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. In the following article, Kaite Mediatore Stover explores some of the prominent book-focused social networking sites and begins the discussion of how these resources, being used by millions of readers, can be incorporated into our RA practice. Along the way, Stover examines the way that readers' advisors can use reader tagging of titles to expand our vocabulary of appeal. Kaite Mediatore Stover is the head of Readers' Services for Kansas City (Mo.) Public Library. She also is a columnist with *Booklist*, writes for the Booklist Online Book Group Buzz blog, and is a contributing writer for NoveList.—*Editor*

J ust when readers' advisors everywhere thought they'd assigned taxonomic ranks to libraries' jungle of bookshelves holding books of every spot and stripe, along comes another new set of shelves needing taming.

First, Melville Dewey gave library staff a system that separated all the reading material by subject area. Then Nancy Pearl and Joyce Saricks further separated the bibliophylums with genre definitions and other elements of appeals, making the species eminently more identifiable to the modern book watcher. Library staff were pleased. Our shelves, it seemed, were ordered, classified, separated, and manageable.

But, just as things seemed to be comfortable, librarians discovered a new online unit of shelves with critters that looked familiar, but were behaving in ways that librarians hadn't quite seen before. The books had the same names, but they were being classed into subgenres, idiosyncratic lists, and cross-pollinated species that defied logic. They weren't being organized by the professionals, but by the readers. Clearly, some form of order needed to be restored, but it would require keepers and visitors to work together to build a system both could use to the most benefit.

Few would argue that the Internet is one big jungle, and navigating it occasionally requires a machete, not a mouse. 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." Yet the moment those brave new explorers of the social Web went searching for readers, librarians knew they had to follow curious Stanleys to even curiouser Livingstones.

SOCIAL ANIMALS

Readers' advisory (RA) is one of the most social services libraries offer. It's no surprise that talking about books so easily made the leap to the Internet. This discussion is a natural extension of the readers' advisory conversation. "The entire point of RA is to reach readers. . . . Library 2.0 tools play to the strengths of RA work and can deepen and broaden the interaction, introduce new ways of connecting books to other items, and enable librarians to enlist the entire community of readers in the collaborative creation of RA services for everyone."[1]

Many library staff will tout the in-person RA interview as the best way to determine what a reader wants in the next book he or she wants to read. In a face-to-face interview, the advisor is privy to tones of voice, facial expressions, and some level of enthusiasm or disdain for a particular type of book. Still others swear by in-depth questioning through reader profile forms, either in print or online. The benefits to the form-based RA are numerous. Patrons can take their time answering the questions and staff can take time to evaluate the forms without worrying about a queue forming behind the reader. More specific information can be obtained, creating better reading matches.

Book-centered social networking sites are a combination of the above. Online readers are using all the descriptors available to express what they like about what they have been reading or what they want to read. They are in a relaxed environment, they are taking their time, they are enjoying looking for the right words, or even using creative terms to describe what they like. Ike Pulver, of Shaker Heights (Ohio) Public Library, notes how wonderful 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)." Pulver refers to appeal as a "feeling taxonomy."[2] The shared language of readers' advisors and readers is changing and expanding when put to use on the Internet.

Expanding readers' services online also creates larger communities of readers and readers' advisors. "The library as a physical place must extend well into the virtual space—in social networking communities, across web sites of all kinds, on any form of digital device."[3] This is how librarians stay aware of how their patrons are using the Internet and which books are generating the most electronic conversations in these "unique environments for expanding baseline library services, for reaching new audiences and providing decidedly new services."[4]

Not only are library staff reaching new and different patrons, but they are improving their own knowledge of books read, heard of, and glanced at, and it is all in one place.

Library staff are equipped with easy-to-use tools that help them organize their own reading and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in reading areas.

What is surprising—perhaps daunting—is the variety of venues available to readers who eagerly share their favorite books, current reads, and ever increasing to-be-read stacks with friends and strangers, both virtual and actual. The number of book-related social networking sites seems to be growing by the hour, but there are three that stand out among readers and library staff, GoodReads, LibraryThing, and Shelfari. Look for a list of others at the end of this article.

BEST IN SHOW

GoodReads, LibraryThing, and Shelfari are all social networking sites with a focus on gathering readers and the titles of what they are reading. They all offer similar basic services. Users register for free and begin adding books by title, author, or ISBN. Almost all of the titles appear with color covers and the option to add to one of three established shelves: Currently Reading, To Be Read, or Have Read. All sites give users the option of adding tags or reviews to the titles, participating in discussions or forums and "friending" other registered users or inviting friends to join the site.

Of the three, LibraryThing, based in Portland, Maine, launched first, in August 2005. Presently there are well over half a million users of LibraryThing, and those users have cataloged over 35 million books. LibraryThing allows application programming interfaces (APIs) for blogs and other websites and is moving into the business of library catalog enhancement with its LibraryThing for Libraries service. More than seventy libraries are using LibraryThing for Libraries, according to the LibraryThing website. The newly released Reviews for LibraryThing for Libraries has just fewer than twenty users.[5]

LibraryThing for Libraries allows libraries to pull in additional information on a title from the content-rich mine of LibraryThing's user-added information. Examples include other editions and translations of the work, similar books, and tags. LibraryThing is quick to point out that all of the information added has been evaluated and vetted by LibraryThing staff for appropriateness and use. Only the five best matches are listed for "similar books." Tags that are too vague or personal are removed. LibraryThing has devoted the same attention to the reviews that are now available for library catalogs. Each one has been read by LibraryThing's staff (two librarians) and those reviews deemed too short, too long, or containing too many quotes, for example, have been culled. A subscribing library's patrons may also contribute reviews to items in the catalog.

There are other entertaining reading-related activities on the LibraryThing website: The Zeitgeist page is full of fascinating statistics and lists for readers with a math bent. For library staff, perhaps one of the most useful lists is "Authors who LibraryThing." This list can serve as a resource for libraries looking for authors to invite for a program or a fun promotional tool to encourage readers to "read what your favorite

author is reading." The only drawback to LibaryThing is the limit to the number of titles a user can catalog with a free account. With a free account, members are permitted up to two hundred books in their personal libraries. To add more titles, a user must either pay a $10 yearly membership or a $25 lifetime membership. Users who obtain a membership are permitted unlimited cataloging of titles.

The second book-related social network on the scene was Shelfari, located in Seattle. Shelfari debuted in October 2006, and the last confirmed report had their total users at one million, although that figure is probably higher by now.[6] Like LibraryThing, Shelfari allows APIs for blogs and other websites as well as the import and export of book lists.

Shelfari has been in the news several times this past year and a half. In November 2007, the social website was accused of duping its new users by sending e-mailed invitations to join Shelfari to everyone in these users' Yahoo!Mail And Gmail e-mail accounts. This "spam" was followed up by reminder e-mails to join Shelfari, and the website lost quite a bit of social capital in the blogosphere as users angrily cancelled accounts and accused Shelfari of "poaching" contact information.[7] Shelfari has since corrected the usability of their sign-up page, and users must make concerted efforts to invite friends to join Shelfari.

Most recently, Shelfari has been acquired by Amazon for an undisclosed sum. In February 2007, Amazon invested $1 million in the social network. This would be just another chapter in the story of a successful little start-up, but for the recent acquisition by Amazon of AbeBooks, an online used and rare book dealer, which had a 40 percent minority interest in competing bibliosocial network LibraryThing.[8]

GoodReads is the last of the three most popular sites, which came on board in December 2006. They boast over 1.5 million users with over 40 million books added.[9] Unlike the other two sites, GoodReads accepts advertising. Small banner ads appear at the bottom of user's pages and larger sidebar ads are loaded on GoodReads' blog pages. GoodReads also offers more entertaining social activities for its users. Recently, GoodReads introduced Listopia, with myriad lists created by users and open to contribution by anyone on GoodReads. Lists include "The Best Books of All Time," "The Worst Books of All Time", and "Thickest Books Ever." It should come as no surprise that the "Best" and "Worst" lists share many titles. The lists get creative, and users can see which lists their friends have contributed to or commented on.

The most popular new feature on GoodReads at the moment is the Never-Ending Book Quiz. GoodReads members test each other's knowledge of all things literary by submitting questions about books and authors. Book lovers beware: It's highly competitive and utterly addicting.

BUILDING THE PERFECT BEAST

While LibraryThing, GoodReads, and Shelfari all offer the same basic no-cost online services of connecting people with shared reading interests through their catalogued libraries,

most users show a preference for one over the other, though some users juggle two or sometimes three accounts. None of the three has yet pulled ahead in an informal survey of users in and out of the library world. But all users had definite reasons for their preferences. The primary reason given for preferring GoodReads over LibraryThing was the unlimited number of books added. Otherwise, most users found the two sites to be equitable in content and usability.

Most Shelfari fans appreciated the ease of use and the linking to Amazon for reviews and bookcovers. Shelfari's bright and colorful interface is a plus for users, and one user appreciates "how easy it is to drop cover images from Shelfari into MySpace."[10]

GoodReads users felt this service offered more social opportunities similar to Facebook or MySpace, and liked that it had no limit on the number of books that could be added. It is also "easier to add books from a mobile device."[11] There is the one shortcoming Bryan Jones saw in GoodReads: "I wish it had more privacy features so different parts of your profile could be viewed by different people."[12]

LibraryThing fans praised the tagging features, the Early Reviewer program, and the Talk discussion board.[13] One user created a list of all of the books booktalked for a conference program. She knew she would run out of time and referred the session attendees to her LibraryThing shelf marked "Conference08" for additional tags, annotations, and titles that weren't mentioned.[14]

Library staff who use all three sites are finding interesting ways to supplement their RA services to the public. Susan Smith of Hodges University suggests using any of the three for youth summer reading programs. Participants "could keep track of their books read online and as part of it, they could agree to let [the library] link to their pages or use the widgets in exchange for an extra prize drawing slip." Smith thought LibraryThing would be the best fit for an idea like this one because it could be tied into LibraryThing for Libraries. She also mentioned tagging each book "SRC 2009" ("Summer Reading Club") or creating an SRC group for participants.[15]

Other library staff use these sites while on the public service desk. It's a quick and easy step to click a "historical fiction" or "cozy mystery" tag or shelf and get many suggestions immediately for the patron waiting at the desk. A post on Book Group Buzz proposed using one of the three sites to record titles read and discussed by a book group. "It's handy to have an easy, visual archive of the books you've selected in the past. Another shelf could collect books that you think the group should consider for future reading."[16]

Tagging, the feature that all users appreciate the most, can also offer the greatest challenge to users. In a search of all three sites for the same book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* by Barbara Kingsolver, there were almost a hundred tags applied to this title. Some tags were as obvious as "food," "memoir," and "environment," but other tags were more perplexing. "Cheryl," "inspirational," "slow food," and "green" were some of the more unusual identifiers applied to this 2007 bestseller.

READERS' ADVISORY

The variety of ways in which readers view books and apply descriptors may offer the best way to capture a book's essence; however, it may also be quite confusing to use some of these terms to describe a book to a patron. In her article on folksonomies, Sharon Cosentino praises the inclusion of social tagging in library catalogs but cautions users, particularly library staff, to "pick your tag words carefully. Select a set of keywords you will readily recall and can use over and over. . . . Use five or six tag words." One tag will have the reader wading through too many titles to manage, and too many tags may leave out other titles that deserve to be found. Avoid using tags that have the same meaning or tags that are too specific to the book. Consider adding an extra tag with year and month (e.g., "2008November").[17]

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Only time will tell how well LibraryThing and Shelfari ride out the recent incursion of Amazon into their reading worlds. Until then, choosing the optimal social network for books and readers will solely be up to the user, patrons, administration, and, quite possibly, what platform a library's catalog can support.

Ease of use, quality of content, and even basic good looks may play into a user's decision. But does a reader need all of them? Of course not. Michael Stephens warns the world about "technolust," that "irrational love for new technology combined with unrealistic expectations for the solutions it brings," which will only lead to technostress over the amount and speed of the new tools on the Internet librarians feel they need to keep up with.[18]

GoodReads, LibraryThing, and Shelfari aren't the only places readers are exploring for their next book. MySpace and Facebook pages display bookshelves and host links and notes to other "good reading you may have missed." Bibliophiles continue to read the myriad blogs devoted to books, publishing, and reading, and have even taken to "tweeting" their latest nightstand selections on Twitter.

Try out all of the Web toys out there. It's the responsibility of a good readers' advisor to at least be familiar with the numerous Internet playthings. But once they've all been taken for a test run, commit to one and politely show the others the door. It will be enough of a time commitment to keep one account current on a reading network, and it will be very important to keep that account up to date.

What library staff need to recognize most is that these bibliosocial networking sites are getting the vocabulary of appeal out there to readers. Librarians enjoy these websites. We are being friended by our patrons, book group members, online friends, and strangers who, it would appear through osmosis, are picking up the lingo of readers' advisors and using it in their own descriptors of what they're reading. A Web nation of feral readers' advisors is being born, who in turn will inform their friends and colleagues of good books to read using the language we've provided in our tags, bookshelves, reviews, and annotations. 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. Now that's a social network.

RELATED WEBSITES

Books I Read (http://apps.facebook.com/ireadit)
This is a Facebook application. Users must have a Facebook page and then register to use this application.

Crime Space (http://crimespace.ning.com)
A place for readers and writers of crime fiction to meet.

Facebook (www.facebook.com)
A social network that will support imported bookshelves from Shelfari, LibraryThing, and GoodReads.

GoodReads (www.goodreads.com)
Users create a catalog of books read, to be read, and currently reading. It has more social Web features than Shelfari and LibraryThing.

LibraryThing (www.librarything.com)
Users create a catalog of books read, to be read, and currently reading. A major focus is serving libraries.

MySpace (www.myspace.com)
A social network that will support imported bookshelves from Shelfari, LibraryThing, and GoodReads.

Reader2Reader (www.reader2reader.net)
A UK social network for readers.

Shelfari (www.shelfari.com)
Users create a catalog of books read, to be read, and currently reading. Fewer social Web features than GoodReads or LibraryThing, but very user friendly.

References

1. Neal Wyatt, "2.0 for Readers," *Library Journal* 132, no. 18 (Nov. 1, 2007): 31.
2. Neal Wyatt, "An RA Big Think," *Library Journal* 132, no. 12 (July 1, 2007): 40.
3. Mike Eisenberg, "The Parallel Information Universe," *Library Journal* 133, no. 8 (May 1, 2008): 25.
4. Ibid, 25.
5. LibraryThing, "LTFL: Libraries using LibraryThing for Libraries," www.librarything.com/wiki/index.php/LTFL:Libraries_using_LibraryThing_for_Libraries (accessed Nov. 7, 2008).
6. Shelfari, "Shelfari Launches New Virtual Bookshelf," press release, Dec. 20, 2007, www.shelfari.com/Shelfari/Press/12-20-07.aspx

Erdman, "Reference in a 3-D Virtual World: Preliminary Observations on Library Outreach In 'Second Life'" *The Reference Librarian* 47, no. 2 (2007): 29–39; K. Swanson, "Second Life: A Science Library Presence in Virtual Reality," *Science & Technology Libraries* 27, no. 3 (2007): 79–86.

18. Andrew Lewis, "Marketing Library Computers to Young Children Using Multimedia," *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 11, no. 1 (2005): 47–62.

19. Voelker, "The Library and My Learning Community"; Doshi, "How Gaming Could Improve Information Literacy."

20. Stephen Abram and Judy Luther, "Born with the Chip," *Library Journal* 129, No. 8 (May, 2004): 34–37, www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA411572 .html (accessed Oct. 29, 2007).

21. Steve Jones, "Let the Games Begin: Gaming Technology and Entertainment among College Students," (Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2003), www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_College_Gaming_Reporta.pdf (accessed Nov. 18, 2007).

22. Diana Oblinger and James L. Oblinger, "Educating the Net Generation," (EDUCAUSE, 2005), http://bibpurl .oclc.org/web/9463 (accessed July 20, 2007).

23. N. Rise, "The Interactive Children's Library of the Future," *Bibliotekspressen* 10 (2006): 16–17; Chris Dede, "Planning for Neomillennial Learning Styles," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2005), www.educause .edu/apps/eq/eqm05/eqm0511.asp?bhcp=1 (accessed Oct. 29, 2007).

24. Robert J. Sternberg, *Cognitive Psychology*, 4th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006).

25. Rhonda Christensen and Gerald Knezek, "Stages of Adoption for Technology in Education," *Computers in New Zealand* 11, no. 3 (1999): 25–29; Fred D. Davis, Richard P. Bagozzi, and Paul R. Warshaw, "User Acceptance of Computer Technology: A Comparison of Two Theoretical Models," *Management Science* 35, no. 8 (1989): 982–1003; Kieran Mathieson, "Predicting User Intentions: Comparing the Technology Acceptance Model with the Theory of Planned Behavior," *Information Systems Research* 2, no. 3 (1991): 173–91; Viswanath Venkatesh et al., "User Acceptance of

Information Technology: Toward a Unified View," *MIS Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2003): 425–78; Michael Leicht and Vicki Sauter, "Managing User Expectations," www.umsl.edu/~sauterv/analysis/user_expectations .html (accessed Nov. 1, 2007).

26. Stanley Smith Stevens, *Psychophysics: Introduction to Its Perceptual, Neural, and Social Prospects* (New York: Wiley, 1975).

27. Amos Tversky, "Features of Similarity," *Psychological Review* 84, no. 4 (1977): 327–52; Stanley Smith Stevens, "The Direct Estimation of Sensory Magnitudes—Loudness," *American Journal of Psychology* 69, no. 1 (1956): 1–25.

28. Michael B. Eisenberg, "Magnitude Estimation and the Measurement of Relevance" (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1986); Guillermo A. Oyarce, "A Study of Graphically Chosen Features for Representation of TREC Topic-Document Sets" (PhD dissertation, University of North Texas, 2000); Abebe Rorissa, "Perceived Features and Similarity of Images: An Investigation into Their Relationships and a Test of Tversky's Contrast Model" (PhD dissertation, University of North Texas, 2005); Mark E. Rorvig, "An Experiment in Human Preferences for Documents in a Simulated Information System (Choice, Simple Scalability)" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1985).

29. University of North Texas—Institutional Research and Accreditation, "Enrollment Fact Sheet—Fall 2006," www.unt.edu/ir_acc/Enrollment%20 Fact%20Sheet/2006-Fall_Enrollment-Fact_Sheet .html#spring5 (accessed Aug. 3, 2007).

30. Peter Dunn-Rankin et al., *Scaling Methods*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004).

31. Entertainment Software Association, "Game Player Data," www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php (accessed Oct. 29, 2007).

32. Dunn-Rankin et al., *Scaling Methods.*

33. Carl Eckhart and Gale Young, "The Approximation of One Matrix by Another of Lower Rank," *Psychometrika* 1, no. 3 (1936): 211–18.

34. Liwen Vaughan, *Statistical Methods for the Information Professional* (Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 2005).

STALKING THE WILD APPEAL FACTOR CONTINUED FROM PAGE 246

(accessed Nov. 8, 2008).

7. LibraryThing, "Shelfari Spam," post on Thingology, Nov. 8, 2007, www.librarything.com/thingology/2007/11/shelfari-spam-basically-social.php (accessed Nov. 8, 2008).

8. John Cook, "Amazon.com buys Shelfari, a startup for book lovers," http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/business/376443_amazonshelfari26.html (accessed Nov. 7, 2008).

9. GoodReads, "Press Information," www.goodreads. com/about/press (accessed Nov. 7, 2008).

10. Leah Dodd, personal communication with the author, Apr. 23, 2008.

11. Alicia Ahlvers, personal communication with the author, Nov. 7, 2008.

12. Bryan Jones, personal communication with the author, Apr. 23, 2008.

13. Lesa Holstine, personal communication with the author, Apr. 23, 2008.

14. Robin Beerbower, personal communication with the author, Apr. 23, 2008.

15. Susan Smith, personal communication with the author, Apr. 28, 2008.

16. Neil Hollands, "Shelfari or LibraryThing for Book Groups," post on Book Group Buzz, June 13, 2008, http://bookgroupbuzz.booklistonline. com/2008/06/13/shelfari-or-library-thing-for-book-groups (accessed Nov. 6, 2008).

17. Sharon L. Cosentino, "Folksonomies: Path to a Better Way?" *Public Libraries* 47, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 2008): 44.

18. Michael Stephens, "Taming Technolust: Ten Steps for Planning in a 2.0 World," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 314.