

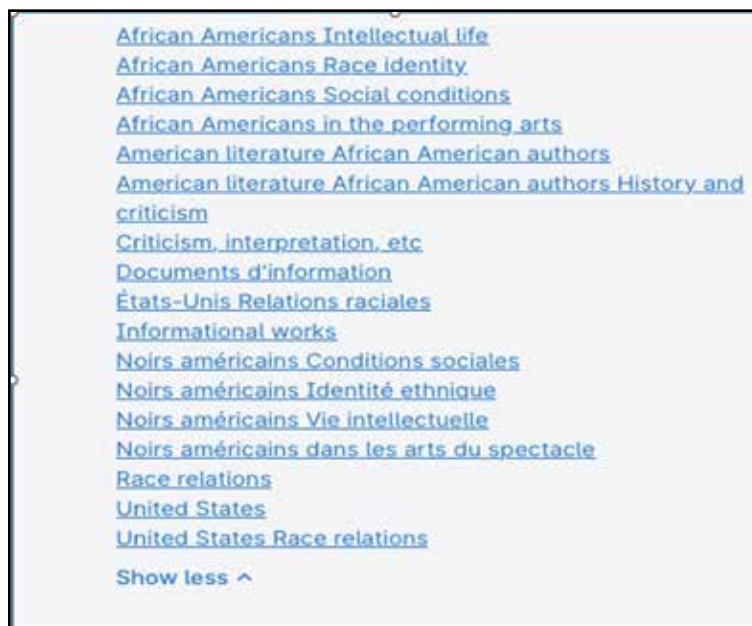
Readers' Advisory

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RA TOOLBOX – Nonfiction: Inside the Book

The inspiration for this article came to me as I was in my car listening to Hanif Abdurraquib's Carnegie winning essays: *A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance* (2021). Nearly every chapter is brimming with fascinating characters of American history, and I was continually sending text messages to myself, including, "Look up Josephine Baker," "Early Black magicians," "Watch the *Chappelle Show*," "Don't watch the *Chappelle Show*." The list was endless. Abdurraquib's poetic essays are filled with pop culture references from his youth and adulthood, as well as often overlooked or misunderstood Black historical figures in American culture. Noting the internal references of Abdurraquib's writing provides an opportunity to expand on the traditional readers' advisory (RA) strategies of appeal through topic, format, and style and create a "companion" appeal to a book to offer readers more choices beyond read-alikes. This is not a new idea; in 2006, Neal Wyatt in her *Library Journal* article "Reading Maps Remake RA: Re-create a book's entire universe online and transform readers' advisory" made the case for "Whole Collection RA," a broad and varied approach that incorporated fiction, nonfiction, and other formats such as video and music. This article will examine the basic entry points for nonfiction RA, take a brief look at the origins of appeal-based nonfiction readers' advisory, and explore the possibilities of Whole Collection RA through an example of "companion references" with Abdurraquib's book.

Figure 1. WorldCat subject headings for *A Little Devil in America*



At its most basic level, nonfiction RA is built into our classification systems and online catalogs. In a title search for Abdurraquib's book in WorldCat (Figure 1), the subjects listed reflected the broad topics of the book, but they understandably do not approach the appeal of a particular work. A patron looking for essays about African American intellectual life, race identity, or the performing arts would be perfectly satisfied clicking on the links to find other essays or books, but Abdurraquib's writing delves into a variety of topics, spanning time, place, and tone,

and compiling possible titles for readers within the book certainly can be used to expand beyond simple subject headings.

Traditional RA techniques do a more thorough job of identifying a book's appeal based on format, style, and subject. Nonfiction RA theory and practice follows closely to guidelines set in Joyce Saricks's work *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, currently on its third edition published in 2005. Saricks provided suggestions for determining appeal factors through reviews and other resources to "develop a vocabulary that builds on the way we naturally think about books and allows us to share them more easily" (p.72). Sandwiched between Saricks's second and third editions, Robert Burgin edited a series of essays entitled *Nonfiction Readers' Advisory*, 2004. Various authors analyzed and described styles of nonfiction writing, subgenres within nonfiction, and the motivations of readers. The volume also includes an informative and entertaining article about the history of RA in librarianship (pp 3-22) that should be required reading to new librarians eager to understand the past and possible futures of RA in the public library. Continuing the work of Burgin and Saricks, Neal Wyatt provided guidance on RA on a variety of subject areas in *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Nonfiction* (2007). In the *Library Journal* article prior to her book's publication "Exploring Nonfiction...", Wyatt stressed the "four new concepts of nonfiction RA: narrative, appeal, subject, and type" (p. 33). Again, like previous RA theory, the focus relies on appeal and subject, connecting readers to their books. These groundbreaking authors all provided an organized and scholarly approach to integrating nonfiction RA services into a more holistic approach to a field that previously concentrated on fiction.

Figure 2. NoveList appeal factors for *A Little Devil in America*

The image shows a sidebar search interface for NoveList. It is titled "Search for More" and contains four sections of filters, each with a heading and a list of items with checkboxes. The "Genre" section includes "Arts and Entertainment", "Autobiographies and memoirs", "Life stories", and "Society and culture". The "Location" section includes "United States". The "Style" section includes "Lyrical" and "Richly detailed". The "Subject" section includes "African American authors", "African Americans in the performing arts", "Intellectual life", "Performing arts", and "Race relations". A "Search" button is located at the bottom left of the sidebar.

Today, EBSCO's NoveList provides the most current and flexible access to nonfiction read-alikes with prescribed terms, curated genre guides, and input from users.

However, it follows limited prescribed appeal factors related to genre, location, style, and subject (see

Figure 2). A sidebar on the screen offers read-alikes that are generated by human input and these additions do offer the beginnings of companion titles that may not show up by selecting the check boxes to search traditional appeal. For instance, one user suggested *Footnotes: The Black Artists Who Rewrote the Rules of the Great White Way* by Caseen Gaines (2021). Another suggested *Josephine Baker* (2017) by Jose-Louis Bocquet, a French graphic novel that would have not otherwise shown up in traditional RA appeal read-alikes because Abdurraqib devoted only a part of one section to Baker. While some readers may want only titles about a particular subject or style of writing, others read nonfiction to learn about topics and may want to explore, as Neal Wyatt puts it, "experiencing the world of a book or exploring its references" (Reading Maps p.38). Wyatt asserts that some books don't lend themselves to easy read-alikes because they may be too distinctive or intricate for simple appeal matching, especially with nonfiction. The example she uses is Suzanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* (2004), a book that I recall being matched with the Harry Potter series to a mostly tepid response. Wyatt's idea to brainstorm and map links to time and place

led to a “reading map” that included Dickens, Regency England, Faeries in British literature, and others (p. 40). The idea of a reading map format, accessible on the web with clickable links to books and web pages was ambitious and time consuming, although with the advances in technology and ease of web design, it should be revisited to engage readers and further RA service. My idea for a companion list is manageable and requires that RA professionals read the book and extracts tangential topics to create a group of titles that will appeal to a reader’s interests.

That brings me back to Hanif Abdurraqib's *A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance*. As I was listening, I continued to compile the subjects that he described in his writing. The people and places he wrote about were easy to document and I found books on many of the topics, although I could not find a book on the pianist Don Shirley which surprised me. I also didn't approach the myriad movies and musical references in the book which were too numerous to compile but would make a great listening or watching list on their own. Below is a sample companion list:

A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance by Hanif Abdurraqib

A Companion Reading List

Movement I: Performing Miracles

Black TV: Five Decades of Groundbreaking Television from Soul Train to Black-ish and Beyond by Bethonie Buter. Black Dog & Leventhal. 2023

Isn't Her Grace Amazing!: The Women Who Changed Gospel Music by Cheryl Wills. Amistad 35. 2022.

Movement II: Suspending Disbelief

The Prestige by Christopher Priest. Tor. 1995

“Overlooked No More: Ellen Armstrong, ‘Marvelous, Mystifying’ Magician of Mirth” by Vanessa Armstrong. *New York Times*. September 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/20/obituaries/ellen-armstrong-overlooked.html>

Didn't We Almost Have It All: In Defense of Whitney Houston by Gerrick Kennedy. Abrams. 2022.

Magically Black and Other Essays by Jerald Walker. Amistad. 2024.

America Diva: Extraordinary, Unruly, Fabulous by Deborah Parédez. W.W. Norton and Company. 2024

What Have We Here?: Portraits of a Life by Billy Dee Williams. Alfred A. Knopf. 2024

Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures by The National Museum of African American History and Culture, Kevin Strait, and Kinshasha Holman Conwill. Smithsonian Books. 2023.

The Black Fantastic: 20 Afrofuturist Stories edited by André M. Carrington. 2025

Movement III: On Matters of Country / Provenance

Fearless and Free: A Memoir by Josephine Baker, translated by Anam Zafar and Sophie Lewis. Tiny Reparations Books. 2025.

The Negro Motorist Green Book Compendium by Victor H. Green. About Comics. 2019.

Words for my Comrades: A Political History of Tupac Shakur by Dean Van Nguyen. Doubleday. 2025.

Movement IV: Anatomy of Closeness // Chasing Blood

Showtime at the Apollo: The Epic Tale of Harlem's Legendary Theatre by Ted Fox. Abrams ComicArts. 2018.

The Last Great Fight: The extraordinary Tale of Two Men and How One Fight Changed Their Lives Forever by Joseph Layden. 2007.

Movement V: Performing Miracles

Rise of Killah: My Life in the Wu-Tang Clan by Ghostface Killah. St. Martin's Press. 2024

From the Streets of Shaolin: The Wu-Tang Clan Saga by S.H. Fernando Jr. Hachette Books. 2021.

Black Punk Now: Fiction, Non-Fiction and Comics edited by James S. Spooner and Chris L Terry. Soft Skull Press. 2023

Whole collection RA and companion reading lists widen the opportunity to bring interesting titles to readers and can open a dialogue to better determine a reader's interests. Fiction titles that defy easy read-alikes and popular nonfiction books that cover a variety of topics are often difficult to categorize with appeal or subject based on catalog entries and reviews. By looking into the book RA librarians can create compelling lists to assist readers and provide yet another way to match a person with their books.

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