

Alert Collector

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Thinking About Genre

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I work in a non-Dewey library that essentially uses a combination of BISAC and simplified language to organize our shelves to create an easily browsable collection. While my area of selection is adult fiction and probably the least different from Dewey libraries, traditional genres can still be a conundrum.

It's not that I don't know genre conventions—I have fifteen years of library experience, have volunteered for numerous genre award committees, and even write reviews for *Library Journal*. The puzzle arises from the conflict between publisher, public, and library views on genre. We can probably add vendor ideas as well, not to mention the numerous public figures who have their thoughts on how genre ought to be divvied up.

Take a novel like *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt. I think most libraries would agree this lives most comfortably on a general fiction shelf. It has an octopus that narrates chapters and is certainly human-like in his intelligence and thought patterns, but he isn't magical, and there isn't special technology that allows him to communicate with anyone in the book. It's a delightful conceit.

There are numerous reviews from the public that label this a mystery, and, indeed, the publisher includes "FICTION / Mystery & Detective / Cozy / Animals" as one of the BISAC subject headings. Though I haven't seen those same reviews use FICTION / Magical Realism or FICTION / Fantasy / Humorous to describe the book, marketers chose to add those alongside categories I feel are more useful for readers' advisory: FICTION / Animals, FICTION / Friendship, FICTION / Family Life / General.

Since our vendors translate BISAC into our categories, the order they're listed in determines whether the book finds a home on our fantasy, mystery, or general fiction shelves. While there is a level of arbitrariness to most genre boundaries, we know that some readers will never look at genres they've already decided they don't enjoy. Someone who, perhaps, thinks fantasy must be epic with swords and elves and balrogs is unlikely to browse for this story of family and friendship there. At the same time, will the die-hard mystery reader feel satisfied if they pick up a novel where there is a disappearance but no focus on investigation?

This can get even more complicated with BISAC categories that don't match a single genre but may be the first listed. One vendor's entry for Jesse Q. Sutanto's *Dial A For Aunties* starts with FICTION / Asian American & Pacific Islander before mentioning humor, mystery, or romance. I think we can all agree that Asian American & Pacific Islander is not a genre.

Aside from more specialized BISAC library issues, there's still the question of whose definitions matter more. If many members of the public do think *Remarkably Bright Creatures* is a great

mystery, do we do them a disservice by not putting it with other mystery novels? Particularly as this impression and the novel's success have increased the use of "mystery" to market books. Marketers and the public may be expanding the scope of the mystery genre.

On the other hand, do we risk making genre less useful for readers who use a more traditional definition? Will they feel tricked or betrayed if they pick up a book that isn't "mystery enough" for them and so trust our categories less? And, where do we place the line between mystery and relationship fiction in this case?

A similar recent example might be the delightful *Pony Confidential* by Christina Lynch. This is heavily marketed as a mystery, mostly has mystery-related BISAC categories—with FICTION / Women being the odd one out—and most professional reviewers mention its mystery nature. However, the public reviews that aren't as positive cite the sparseness of the mystery, and the *Library Journal* review doesn't mention mystery at all.

Personally, I would argue it is closer to *Remarkably Bright Creatures* and its focus on relationships than it is to Sherlock Holmes, whose hat adorns the cover. It's a kind of on-the-cusp case. Its reviews are overall incredibly positive—it's a truly gripping novel—but I wonder if they would be even more positive if it were marketed as a book that contains a mystery rather than *being* a mystery? It's an adult *Charlotte's Web* that takes to the road first for revenge, then for forgiveness, that intersects with an old murder case the protagonist pony ambles through while exploring many problems of modern US society. Doesn't that allow for excellent placement in so many sections of the library, in addition to mystery?

There won't be any perfect way to decide how to choose each book's essential genre category—especially in today's world, where genre blends are steadily increasing. There are certainly many libraries that forego genre shelves altogether (as a library user, I tend to prefer this—after all, one thing that sets libraries apart from bookstores is that I can try everything without cost, so getting intrigued by something outside my normal reading tastes comes with no risk). Still, I do think it's important to consider how people use genre across a book's lifetime. Where are publishers telling readers to find a book? How are readers talking about books to each other? And how do we translate readers' genre language to discoverability in our buildings? Do we trust them to be able to use our language, or do we need to have shelves for cozy horror or mythological retellings or romantasy or any other terms gaining popularity?