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What shall I read next? Developing tools for reader support

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Introduction

The canvas of imaginative literature is a very diverse and colourful one that offers the reader access to a range of stimulating emotions, insights and scenarios. There are several types, including drama, poetry and fiction with a myriad of genres of writing, each with its own following. Fiction reading is a significant cultural and recreational activity around the world. But without the reader, the author's efforts are to some extent hollow. Toyne and Usherwood (2001) have charted the significance that reading has on people and they have included a taxonomy of the impact of fiction reading. Authors, publishers, booksellers and librarians all have an interest in fostering this activity not simply for commercial motives but to nurture the cultural wealth of society. How then to ensure that readers find and read what they want in their quest to derive the utmost pleasure from fiction? This paper explores some of the means developed.

Quantitative Data and Reading [UK]

In the UK figures on sales of fiction are reasonably encouraging and data from the Office of Public Lending Right indicate that a range of material is being borrowed. Recent statistics from the annual survey of public library material spending also show an encouraging trend, although library borrowing in total has declined over the past few years. Selected relevant data is annually summarised in a compilation from the Library and Information Statistics Unit (Creaser, Maynard and White 2001).

According to data in *Book Facts 2001* consumer book buying in the UK appears generally buoyant (Book Marketing Limited 2001). The trend in adult fiction sales is upwards in both volume and value terms. Children's fiction sales present a more complex picture with volume declining and value now tending upwards. (See Figure 1.)

YEAR	1998	1999	2000
Adult Fiction vols.	105 millions	106 millions	108 millions
Adult Fiction value £	528 millions	545 millions	585 millions
Child Fiction vols.	71 millions	64 millions	55 millions
Child Fiction value £	222 millions	208 millions	212 millions

Figure 1 ~ Data on Fiction Purchasing

Data from the Office of Public Lending Right, in the year 2000-2001 indicate that a dozen writers were estimated to have over a million loans each from public libraries (GREAT BRITAIN. Office of Public Lending Right 2002). In the last five reporting years names that regularly reach these estimates include: Agatha Christie, Catherine Cookson, Josephine Cox, Dick Francis, Jack Higgins, Ruth Rendell, and Danielle Steele. Amongst the most borrowed children's reading in 2000-2001 are: J. K. Rowling, with what is now an array of Harry Potter tales, and the inimitable Roald Dahl.

Data in the *Public Library Materials Fund and Budget Survey* published in 2001 described a reversal in the downward trend in book expenditure of recent years by identifying a 1.1 percent increase for 2000-2001 in book spending (Maynard and Fletcher 2001). Whether this is enough to reverse the historic decline in public library borrowing is open to question, however.

The numbers show that fiction buying and borrowing still hold a strong appeal for many. Moreover, if public library spending is, at best, unspectacular and borrowing is in decline then efforts need to be directed towards maximising the value of what stock there is. On either count, fiction readership promotion is of the utmost value.

Reader Support at the Macro Level

How can readers be assisted to sustain and even extend their enjoyment of fiction reading? A key factor is bringing suitable reading to people's attention.

The book trade undertakes a great deal of promotional activity as part of its business endeavour. Much of this is concentrated on the new output that emerges regularly from the industry. The staples of promotion are posters and special displays that are tied in with press advertising and book reviews. There are also authors' signing sessions and lectures, as well as the occasional broadcasting appearance by a prominent author with something new to publicise. Libraries can capitalise on the trade's efforts by appropriate planning and liaison.

There are also the more broadly based promotional initiatives, special events and themed celebration days [or even longer!]. The [UK] National Literacy Trust (2002) website includes an extensive listing, some of which are noted below:

National Storytelling Week {February}
Bedtime Reading Week

World Book Day {March}

International Children's Book Day {April}

National Share a Story Month {May}

Swap a Book Day {September}
International Literacy Day

National Children's Book Week {October}
National Poetry Day
International School Library Day

There is clearly much scope for libraries to participate in these initiatives to advantage.

There are other important ongoing initiatives designed to stimulate the reading habit in all ages and to improve access to good reading material. The *Bookstart* project is aimed at babies and toddlers and involves co-operation between libraries and health authorities (Bookstart 2002). The *Branching Out* programme is an initiative from the [UK] Society of Chief Librarians with support from the National Lottery through the Arts Council of England. The programme encompasses several important projects concerned with access and reading development (Branching Out 2002). The programme has had a significant [and measurable] impact on the professional development of the librarians involved also. This aspect has been summarised in a recent article (Train 2001).

An interesting example of an action research based regional promotional initiative in the UK is the *Books Connect* project which has involved a range of agencies in the East Midlands area. Details are available on the Project website (Books Connect 2002). The project, whose aim is: "... to pilot reading inspired creative partnerships between public libraries, artists and museums." tests the scope and operation of cross domain working through a variety of local small scale promotional activities. A range of exciting events and programmes has taken place. The project is now in its evaluation phase and the individual activities are being assessed through quantitative and qualitative criteria using an evaluation 'toolkit' developed by the Library and Information Statistics Unit at Loughborough University.

Reader Support at the Library Interface

Though special events and individual projects may compel a significant degree of attention, providing reader support in the library is a continuous process that takes place at several levels of service, day in, day out. It begins with making appropriate decisions regarding acquisitions selection within an invariably constrained budget for materials. Stock rotation around service points adds a further dimension to extending access to reading material and it contributes to maximising the value added. Information from automated circulation data offers the prospect of evidence-based management of such a strategy to achieve more effective stock deployment.

A key component in helping readers of all ages make choices is the provision of direct reader advice and support at individual service points; or even occasionally in virtual mode through electronic help services. Readers' Advisers have a long tradition of providing appropriate and authoritative guidance by drawing on their professionalism, experience and bibliographic knowledge. The research by Toyne and Usherwood (2001) reveals how highly regarded and instrumental appropriate personal reader support by librarians is. Of particular interest in their report is an account of how a librarian operating in a 'book doctor' mode describes work aimed at encouraging readers to try different authors.

The Readers' Adviser is typically supported by a panoply of general and specialised bibliographies and guides. These augment the knowledge, learning and experience that he or she brings to the task. Nonetheless, offering advice to the discerning fiction reader still poses quite a challenge. Individual tastes and preferences are so very varied, yet sometimes so trammelled. Exploring hitherto unconsidered writers can offer rich rewards but it has to be encouraged from a sound basis of knowing what will work. What really helps decide what to read next?

It is worth noting how information technology has evolved to provide support for readers and their advisers. Prospective book purchasers who visit the Amazon website are offered help in selection by ‘linking’ software which embodies a useful “... .. people who bought this title also bought” approach that is reminiscent of citation linking. As with citation linking, it may not offer perfection, but its value for some circumstances is convincing.

Developing Reader Support Tools

The Library and Information Statistics Unit [LISU] at Loughborough University has developed fiction selection aids that link similar authors and genres. It publishes two important and successful guides to English fiction; one is concerned with adult fiction and the other with children’s fiction. They are entitled: *Who Else Writes Like? A Readers’ Guide to Fiction Authors*, and *Who Next ...? A Guide to Children’s Authors*. Both publications have been developed over the years by expert Editors with the help of a panel of librarians who are specialists in their fields. The work is co-ordinated and managed at LISU as publisher.

New editions are brought out regularly to keep pace with changes in publishing such as new authors, and genres, and to reflect changes in taste or popularity. Continuous improvement in content, layout and presentation is sought to ensure that the guides reflect the needs of users. In addition to assembling feedback from reviews and general comments received, LISU seeks views through a formal questionnaire survey that is distributed widely before work on a new edition is begun. The fourth edition of *Who Else ...* is imminent. It lists over 1,800 authors, and with each name suggests others who write in a similar way. The number of alternative authors listed for each entry is between three and twelve. The entry for each author includes other detail to help make a choice. (See Figure 2)

Douglas Adams 1952-2001 <i>Science Fiction: Humour</i> www.douglasadams.com		
Neil Gaiman Rob Grant	Tom Holt Terry Pratchett	Robert Rankin Bob Shaw
Terry Pratchett 1948- <i>Fantasy: Humour</i> <i>Discworld Series</i>		
Douglas Adams Piers Anthony Robert Asprin Craig Shaw Gardner Rob Grant Simon R Green	Andrew Harman Tom Holt Barry Hughart Tanith Lee Robert Rankin Martin Scott	BSFA 1989 ✪

Figure 2 ~ Sample Entry in *Who Else ...*

The main author entries include the date of birth (and where appropriate, death) where this is known, and for authors who are not English, the nationality or place of birth. Where authors write exclusively within a category or genre this is indicated, as are the names of characters that regularly feature in a writer’s work. Brief details of literary prizes won are included and, if the author has a page on the Internet, the web address is listed. The inclusion of web addresses not only reflects the times, but is a response to user feedback as it became clear that from the last survey that this information was wanted.

Decisions about which authors to include are determined by a mixture of objective and subjective criteria. The basis for the initial selection of authors is the data gathered by the UK Office of Public Lending Right that indicate the most popular authors according to levels of

borrowing. Additional names are suggested by a panel of advisors that are drawn from front-line professional librarians. In the main authors are only included when they have three books to their name and when their novels are easily obtainable from bookshops and libraries. As 'new' writers are added so some, which the advisors consider are no longer being widely read, are omitted. In the latest edition 394 new authors are being added and there are 188 deletions, resulting in a net gain of around one fifth in the number being listed.

Alternative ways of finding suitable reading are also provided through a series of appended lists. They include; an index of genres, a list of literary prize winners, an index to characters in fiction as well as a list of further reading which includes websites and other fiction guides.

A new edition of *Who Next ...* is also in preparation and will appear in Autumn 2002. This guide to children's authors was published for the first time during the National Year of Reading. It lists around 400 writers of children's fiction, and functions in a similar way to its counterpart for adult fiction. Two sample entries are shown below. (Figure 3).

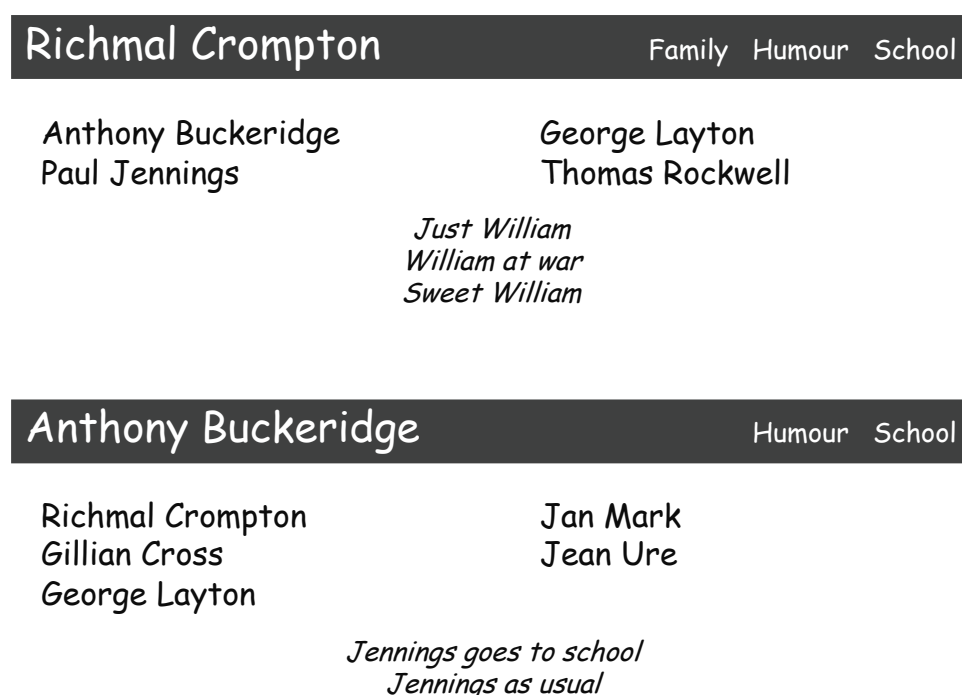


Figure 3 ~ Sample Entry in *Who Next ...*

The links made between authors are of genre and theme, and also of styles of writing, or similar aspects of characterisation and settings. A few of the most important titles for each author are included in the text, so that readers trying an author new to them have some idea of where to start. The book is arranged by three 'audience age groups': children aged 5-7, 8-11 and 12-14.

Selecting reading is a very personal thing and the Editors of the last edition of *Who Next ...* wisely recognise this. They also point out in the Introduction to the work the merits of debating just how writers fit into genres.

“Of course no author writes exactly like another, and readers will not agree with all our choices. Questioning Who next? may be one of the pleasures of using it, and a source for discussion and debate.”

At the end of *Who Next ...* are indexes of authors by theme or genre and children's series, and a list of authors who have won prizes for their children's fiction. The forthcoming edition will also include a list of picture books for older readers.

The target audience for both these works is not simply librarians but readers themselves. The children's guide also attracts use by parents and teachers as well as by school librarians. The works represent an important contribution to nurturing reading and supporting librarians in effective collection management and reader support.

End Note

What a profound effect some books can have on an individual, a group and even society at large. An excellent compilation by Antonia Fraser (1992) chronicles the influence that reading has had on a range of cultural, literary and political figures. It is a testament to the impact of reading as well as a superb example of modern mass book production and should be a compulsory text for all information and library managers. Here, in an extract, Hermione Lee sums up rather colourfully what books do to the receptive mind.

Like losing your virginity, if you're that old, or hearing of the assassination of President Kennedy, if you're *that* old, there are some first readings you can always remember. Open the book again, and the place and time of the first impression come back at you, like a sharp smell or a strong flavour. Elizabeth Bowen calls it 'an echotrack of sensation'. The books that retain it are the ones that changed you, however slightly; made you shift your sense of what the world was like, what it was possible to know and to feel.

(Hermione Lee, *In: The Pleasure of Reading*. Edited by Antonia Fraser. London, Bloomsbury, 1992.)

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