

Promoting Jewish Authors with Readers' Advisory Techniques

by Rosalind Reisner

Description: You know there's great fiction sitting on your library's shelves—how do you get it into the hands of the right reader? And how do you recommend books you haven't read? Learn how to conduct a "readers' advisory interview" to find out what people love about the books they read and learn how to "read" a book in a few minutes so you can suggest it to your readers.

Rosalind Reisner is the author of the reference work *Jewish American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interests* published by Libraries Unlimited/Greenwood Press. She has worked in public, academic, special, and synagogue libraries for over twenty-five years and is the Vice-President of the Central Jersey Chapter of AJL. Currently the Program Coordinator at Central Jersey Regional Library Cooperative in Freehold, Rosalind speaks and writes about Jewish fiction, readers' advisory services, and synagogue library management.

The title of this talk comes from the fact that I've been thinking a lot about Jewish American literature. I was lucky enough to be able to spend 3 years reading, re-reading, and thinking about Jewish fiction while writing the book *Jewish American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interest*,

part of the Genreflecting Readers' Advisory Series published by Libraries Unlimited. The goal of the book is to help readers find good Jewish books to read and for librarians to be able to answer the question, "Can you recommend a good book?" In the book, I annotate over 700 titles, make reference to others, and try to make connections among authors in terms of their appeal to readers.

I thought a lot about how to suggest books in the process of writing. My challenge was how to structure a whole body of literature so it would make sense to readers and readers' advisors. One of the things I kept in mind was the wonderful quote by Saul Bellow—"We are always looking for the book it is necessary to read next."

The book includes chapters on all different genres: mysteries, thrillers, historical fiction, literary fiction, science fiction, and fantasy. Those genres have established sub-genres and there are other reader's advisory guides in print form from my publishers and the American Library Association, with lots of ideas to help suggest titles to readers.

When I started writing my book, my publisher asked me to do some market research and find out if there were other books that covered my topic. I discovered that there were no extensive guides to Jewish American literature. But what I also discovered, and this surprised me, was that the existing readers' advisory guides shortchanged Jewish authors. Guides to mysteries, for instance, didn't include Stuart

Kaminsky's Abe Lieberman series or Rochelle Krich's novels or series. So, I felt that I had a mission to help put Jewish novels into the hands of readers, Jewish or not.

As the volunteer librarian at my synagogue for the past 25 years, I have had an opportunity to connect readers with the books they'll enjoy reading. That's what readers' advisory service is all about. For those of you who are unfamiliar with readers' advisory service, it's simply the effort to connect readers and books in a systematic way. It's an aspect of library work that has experienced a real renaissance in the last 15 years, and in my opinion, it's just in time. The World Wide Web has changed the nature of reference and information services in libraries quite dramatically, to the point where reference work has decreased, and there are rumblings from public school and university administrators and other would-be prognosticators, that the physical library will become obsolete if it isn't already. It amazes me no end to hear these predictions. Libraries have always been about reading for pleasure, and in public libraries, traditionally more than half of circulation is of fiction. So readers' advisory work is a core service of libraries and whether you read a traditional book, listen to it on tape or, CD, or download it and read it on an electronic device, choosing that book and talking about books is here to stay.

So how do we do what I've proposed in this talk—get fiction into the hands of the right readers? Readers' advisory work can be scary. How can I suggest a book to someone else? I haven't read everything in the library and maybe I don't like the kind of books this person likes to read anyway? We're going to learn some techniques that will help us to suggest books, specifically; we're going to learn how we can think about fiction in a way that makes it easier to talk about it with readers. And we'll do this by learning about appeal characteristics.

The concept of appeal characteristics was developed by a librarian named Joyce Saricks, at the Morton Grove Public Library in Illinois and described in her book *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*. Suppose you've read a book that you've enjoyed. You want to tell a friend about it. The appeal characteristics are the language you would naturally use to describe this book. They provide a framework for categorizing what people like based on the way the general reader would describe a book. It allows us to talk about books without using judgmental terms; instead we use descriptive terms, because we are discussing readers' perceptions, not making critical judgments. We are, like Saul Bellow said, helping the reader find that next necessary book.

There are a number of different appeal characteristics, and you'll develop your favorites, your handy shorthand to identify books. I'll describe the ones we'll use today.

Character-driven novels

These are the novels where the characters step off the page and spend time with us, whose actions we find troubling, pleasing, or even mystifying. These novels give us the chance to identify with characters who struggle with issues we recognize from our own lives. Or, we can enjoy reading about characters entirely different from us, and through them experience thoughts and lives far from our own. Often the author uses first person narration, making the reader feel like a friend hearing a story. Other character-driven novels may be written in the third person, but from the character's point of view.

Plot-driven novels

Readers who are interested in plot want to be carried along by the story: its situations and events. They are interested in the author's point of view and eager to know how the threads of the narrative will come to a conclusion. Pacing will vary in plot-driven novels from leisurely and descriptive to quick and action-oriented. Let the reader tell you what it is about plots that he/she enjoys. Is it a certain type of story, a mystery or historical novel, a coming of age story, etc?

Novels where setting is important

In these novels, character and plot are intertwined with time and place. Novels where setting is strong display an extraordinary range of tone, from elegiac to satirical to magical realist and beyond. Readers who like setting often want to learn something from novels—about an occupation, a place, or a time. Historical fiction often appeals to readers because of setting. Sometimes the setting of a novel is so much part of the story that it feels like an additional character.

Novels where language is important

Novels with language as the primary appeal are extremely varied, but they are distinguished by the voice in which they're told. What unites these novels is that readers will exclaim that they love the way they are written, whether for poetic, humorous, or haunting language. The language is memorable.

A word about pacing

Pacing is not exactly an appeal characteristic, but it is something we pick up about a book automatically, almost without thinking. We are referring to pacing when we say that we couldn't put a book down. Just

because a reader says that they stayed up all night reading a book doesn't mean that the pacing was necessarily fast; it could mean that the book was engrossing. Indicators for pacing: does the action start on the first page or does the book open with description? Is there more dialogue or more description? Is the book densely written? Are there short paragraphs, sentences or chapters? Are there multiple plot lines, flashbacks, or alternating chapters from different points of view? These may slow the story down or may be a technique to heighten tension and pacing.

One of the interesting things about the appeal characteristics is that if you think about the books you read in terms of the appeal characteristics, you remember more than if you try to remember plot. I was skeptical when I first heard this, but it does work!

It frees us from relying on plot summaries by providing a framework on which we can attach all the information we know about an author or title—drawn from our own reading of books, reviews, book jacket summaries, as well as what we have heard about a book or author from fans or colleagues. If we rely on plot summaries then we are tied to talking only about books we've read—and whose plots we remember.

When we read for pleasure, we aren't being analytical—we've turned off that part of our brain that we use when we read for learning. So, it's often hard to verbalize or characterize what it is about the book. That's why when someone asks what you've read recently you sometimes can't remember the title or the author of the book you read last week.

So if people have turned off the analytical portion of their brains when it comes to their recreational reading, then this is where we need to provide a framework to help them express their feelings about the books they read. This is where the appeal characteristics will help us.

Now we're going to try identifying the appeal characteristics. The excerpts below consist of the opening paragraph or two from several novels. We're going to read several of them together and then see if we can start to identify from these excerpts, what the appeal characteristics are. Since the first page of any novel is extremely important, the author is very careful to set the scene and give the reader a sense for the "feel" of the novel. That means that the appeal characteristics make their appearance right away. I've included my comments about the appeal of these novels in italics for the first few. Try your hand at figuring out the appeal of each of these novels. After the excerpts is a handout called "How To Read A Book in Five

Minutes” which will help you scan books and understand their appeal. Please feel free to contact me (rcreisner@comcast.net) if you have any questions, or would like some recommendations for additional reading on readers’ advisory services.

1. Look for Me by Edeet Ravel

“I woke up and didn’t know where I was. This happens to me frequently: I emerge in stages from a deep sleep and I can’t remember what time of day it is, or what life I’m living. Am I in my parents’ seven-room flat in the desert, waking to a breakfast of rolls and butter and nine percent cheese, or living with neighbors who are tiptoeing around my sofa bed so as not to disturb me, or in my army cot, facing a day of cleaning toilets because I’m in trouble with my sergeant again? Or have I woken in some altogether unknown place, where people wear black capes, say, and hop from place to place instead of walking?”

This character addresses the reader directly in a unique voice—confiding, familiar, and quirky. We know right away that this may be someone with an interesting story. She had an unconventional upbringing, she doesn’t follow the rules, and she expects that her life will be unusual. And we may also get a sense, from her last comment, that maybe this plot will require us to suspend disbelief, just a little. So for the reader, the question is right away, are we drawn in by her particular voice, her way of looking at things? Are we annoyed that she’s a non-conformist or interested in her attitude?

2. The Laws of Return by Cameron Stracher

I am eight days old. The *mohel* hovers over me, a scalpel in his hand. I scream. He slices. I am shorn from my foreskin, that fatty overcoat, exposed and raw before the world. *Cha’yim ben Binyamin*, proclaims the rabbi. Colin, son of Benjamin. Grow in vigor to a love of *Torah*, to the marriage canopy, and to a life of good works.

Later I lie wrapped in bandages, while the guests drink sweet wine and vodka, and my parents sip Chablis. *Mazel tov! L’chayim!* They dance around me.

Who are these people? I wonder. Whose eyes, whose hair, whose teeth? Each Jew’s life is a cold swim in a deep pool. We crawl to the surface, shake water from our backs, stand upright.

We begin.

The character’s unusual “voice” may catch readers’ interest or not—detached, observant, a little irreverent. It’s clear that we’ll get the life story—this author is signaling that he starting in the very beginning with the birth of the character. What’s the importance of starting with a Jewish ritual? It signals that this novel will be about Jewish issues, concerns in this boy/man’s life. There’s something unusual about the name Colin for a Jewish boy. Also, the choice of drinks--sweet wine and vodka for the guests, and Chablis for the parents. Does this signal a difference between Colin’s parents and other, maybe older guests? That they’re assimilated, less wedded to their Jewishness?

3. The Book of Splendor by Frances Sherwood

The bride was an orphan, and therefore the rabbi’s wife was the one to accompany here to the Khuppah. According to custom, the bride walked seven times around her bridegroom to show that he was the center of her existence and that he would receive the light and virtue that marriage brings. Afterward, the rabbi recited a portion of Psalm 118 and a short blessing. He told the bridegroom to be good to his wife, and his wife to be good to her husband. Both the bride and the groom had been outfitted in new clothes, and the wedding feast—kreplach stuffed with cheese and kasha knishes, smoked fish and pickled cucumber, radish salad, kugels of various kinds, and honey cake, days in joyous preparation—stood ready in the Jewish town hall, built by their mayor, Maisel. It was all going as it should be. Behind the wall in

the synagogue separating the women from the men, the women, although not able to see the rabbi or the couple, were smiling. It was the beginning of a new family, who could not be happy?

4. The Longest Night by Gregg Keizer

Tuesday: April 27, 1943

Weiss stood beside the empty train and listened to the huge black locomotive tick and click as its firebox cooled. He caught a whiff of coal smoke from its open furnace door.

Those he'd lifted and helped out and down from the cattle car, the mother with her little girl, the angry man with glasses, the old woman, all the others, had long disappeared into the dark behind Paul Kagen, the *manzer* who still thought he ran this crazy business. The rest, freed from their rolling prisons, had followed, all heading for the shores of the Waddensee. When Weiss looked past the front of the locomotive, the light from the flickering parachute flare swinging above was just enough to show the last shadows vanishing down the roadbed. The smart thing was to walk after them. A month ago he would have done just that, no question.

5. Solomon and Sheba by India Edghill

Solomon was a great king, a man of wisdom and power; *Bilqis was a djinn's daughter, a creature of sand and fire*. So a harper would begin his tale; it is tradition, after all. And so shall I begin my own song to tell the tale of my father and the woman who became more to me than my own mother—for when one has broken every rule and violated every commandment, only tradition can redeem that tale, make it sweet to swallow.

6. Goodbye Columbus by Philip Roth

The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses. Then she stepped out to the edge of the diving board and looked foggily into the pool; it could have been drained, myopic Brenda would never have known it. She dove beautifully, and a moment later she was swimming back to the side of the pool, her head of short-clipped auburn hair held up, straight ahead of her, as though it were a rose on a long stem. She glided to the edge and then was beside me. "Thank you," she said, her eyes watery though not from water. She extended a hand for her glasses but did not put them on until she turned and headed away. I watched her move off. Her hands suddenly appeared behind her. She caught the bottom of her suit between thumb and index finger and flicked what flesh had been showing back where it belonged. My blood jumped.

That night, before dinner, I called her.

7. When I Lived in Modern Times by Linda Grant

When I look back I see my self at twenty. I was at an age when anything seemed possible, at the beginning of times when anything *was* possible. I was standing on the deck dreaming; across the Mediterranean we sailed, from one end to the other, past Crete and Cyprus to where the East begins. *Mare nostrum*. Our sea. But I was not in search of antiquity. I was looking for a place without artifice or sentiment, where life was stripped back to its basics, where things were fundamental and serious and above all modern.

This is my story. Scratch a Jew and you've got a story. If you don't like elaborate picaresques full of unlikely events and tortuous explanations, steer clear of the Jews. If you want things to be straightforward, find someone else to listen to.

8. Mazel by Rebecca Goldstein

Sasha's not a strong believer in the principle of causality. Sure, if you look back, with all the unfazability of retrospection, you can say that, because this had happened, so then, that had happened. But

that doesn't mean such a "this" will ever again be followed by such a "that," not in the whole history of the world. Maybe it will, maybe it won't. You can never be certain, and that's because there's such a maze as mazel.

Mazel, as Sasha expounds it, is the great confounder of closed systems and their pretenders. Mazel is the imp of metaphysics.

How to read a book in five minutes, with thanks to Jane K. Hirsh and Georgine N. Olson, Kaite Mediatore, and Mary K. Chelton

Take a pile of new or interesting-looking older titles. Give each one five minutes by the clock, and then write on a 3 x 5 card, author, title, genre, call #, and a brief note of contents and use. Use the list below as a beginning guide to what to look for and how to do it fast:

Fiction Checklist

- a. How does the cover indicate the contents? Metallic lettering means glitzy; beige and brown colors mean serenity. What does the publisher want to tell you or want you to think about the book? Is the cover attractive and to whom? Can a fiction type be assigned based on the cover alone?
- b. Blurb: does it lure in reader without revealing whole plot? Is it enticing? Does it give an idea of the storyline? Is it inviting? Teasing, ominous?
- c. Heft: can you balance it in bed? How long is it—will it be daunting to recommend because of length?
- d. Type—is the typeface easy to read; is there plenty of white space framing the text?
- e. Read first chapter—does it pull you right into the story or is there a slow build-up? If it's a series title, how smoothly does it deliver background info?
- f. Skim and read bits and pieces here and there throughout the book—does it seem to flow? Are you still able to follow some of the plot? Do the same character names reappear? Does what you read match up with the jacket blurb? What's your general impression?
- g. Read the end—if it has an epilogue, read a couple of sections before the epilogue. Is there a conclusion or is it open-ended? Does the ending read like a checklist, wrapping up all loose ends?
- h. What can you tell about the
 - a. Style: humorous, serious, length of sentences, sections or chapter; dialogue?
 - b. Pacing: leisurely or action-oriented; does the book appear to move quickly with lots of dialogue or does the text seem to lean towards description and character development?

- c. Characters: many or few: are they a recognizable “type”; does it seem character or action-oriented
- d. Setting: time; place; integral or wallpaper
- e. Storyline: character or plot driven
- f. Genre: does it follow genre conventions: sub-genre?
- g. Writing style: dense and slow; quick and clear; descriptive; are the sentences long and complex or short and choppy? Is following the story easy or does the reader have to pay attention to small details? Conversational, scan easily or require patience to read?
- h. Format: Narrative, flashbacks, alternating narrator, letters, first person, omniscient author. Does the book employ any of the following literary devices—flashbacks, alternating narrator, letters, first person/third person, straight narrative?
- i. Does this bring to mind any other books or authors as readalikes? Connect with other books. Which ones and why? What are the similarities: plot, characters, language, setting, and pacing?
- j. Look at a review to pick up clues to appeal
- k. Ask yourself: who for? What for? Would a book group enjoy this book?