

I interviewed an old coworker of mine, Mrs. H. She was the supervisor of the adult reference staff when I worked (in circulation) with her, a position she held for eight years. She had 25 years of reference experience, and she was the resident romance queen at our library. She gave book talks, wrote blogs and lists, made countless recommendations, and was the collection developer for our romance collection. In the time since I left that library, she transferred departments, where she now works in cataloging. She misses the patrons, but she still has ample opportunity to train people in the art of reference and reader's advisory; she is an official mentor in the state librarian association, she stills buys romance for the library, and as she walks through the library, staff will flag her down and ask for her advice and assistance. I've had many conversations with her about her work philosophy and experiences, both formally and informally, and it was great to dig into that further with her. We spoke on Zoom on October 28.

#### *Reader's Advisory Preparation*

The most important attitude one must cultivate as a reference librarian, according to Mrs. H, is having an interested and inquiring mind. She described her daily preparation of scanning the New York Times for news on politics, climate science, social science, just to know what's out there and be able to make relevant suggestions for patrons. "I certainly don't read all the books and articles, and I don't know any of those subjects in depth, but knowing a little bit can help me to tune into what a patron needs and help them find the information they want" (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022).

To constantly improve as a librarian, Mrs. H loves using her tools, which she breaks down into professional resources and local resources. Professional resources include webinars from publishers, reading trade publications, and signing up for NetGalley to explore upcoming titles and see what other librarians are saying. Local resources are things like being familiar with

small publishers that cater directly to your service population, partnering with staff that have more knowledge on certain topics than you, and asking patrons directly about how well or poorly they've been served by your collection and RA recommendations.

### *Training and Staffing Concerns*

Mrs. H stressed the importance of having each member of the team being well-rounded, to the point where she exclaimed that she needed a synonym for “well-rounded.” Everyone got basic training on reader’s advisory, based on a course on NoveList and Mrs. H’s own expertise. I got a taste of this when I asked my supervisor for some reference training; at my first lesson with Mrs. H, she handed me a printout of an old but effective web module and walked me through every patron interaction she’d had that morning. Mrs. H knew she was very good at her job, and while she didn’t expect everyone to be on her level, she expected that everyone would practice doing RA with patrons and learning from their mistakes until they were able to provide a base level of service. She mentioned in our interview that a staff member might have a disability or personality that affected their ability to perform RA services. “A really shy, stuttering, neurodiverse person may never be me in a reader’s advisory interaction. That’s fine! But that person has to be able to listen, has to be able to ask the RA questions, and has to be able to use tools to help that patron get their answers met. That patron’s not going to have the same experience as me, and that’s fine. Staff just have to be well trained enough to do their job” (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022). People have different capabilities, and as long as we’re not leaving our patrons hanging, it doesn’t matter if most people don’t become RA superstars. It’s unfair to staff to guarantee patrons a perfect RA interaction, but Mrs. H worked with each staff member to ensure they could guarantee a positive and educated try, with experience and practice behind it all.

Similarly, she wholly accepted that her staff members had different reading habits and interests. “I can’t dictate what you do on your off time. I can’t tell you that you have to read broadly, so that you can give broad service, and I can’t tell you that you have to read genres or literature that make you deeply uncomfortable, so that you can provide global service. The thing to realize about reader’s advisory, like anything else in reference work, is that you don’t have to be an expert on everything. You have to know how to use your tools” (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022). As long as they were comfortable with their databases and their ability to listen to and question patrons, she knew they could work within unfamiliar genres.

That being said, she still wanted each employee to have some varied experience with genre at its broadest. Her library had three different floors with adult reference desks: fiction, nonfiction, and media. Reference assistance is offered at each desk during open hours, which is 9am-9pm weekdays and 9am-6pm Saturdays. With many hours to fill, she had no interest in siloing people off in their comfort zones. “It’s fine to have a preference, it’s fine to have a strength, but you have to aggressively crosstrain people,” she said (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022). When she made schedules, Mrs. H took into account which desks people preferred; she was happy to put someone who excelled at nonfiction recommendations on the nonfiction floor more often than not. However, every shift would include rotations at the other desks, so they could “stretch their muscles.” Letting that person stay only at the nonfiction desk would have made them a “one trick pony,” which she said makes running an effective department difficult. Rotating the entire staff helped her to always have the desks appropriately staffed and also helped staff members grow their skills individually. As Mrs. H repeated throughout our interview, the only way to get better is to practice.

There was one issue where Mrs. H refused to cater to her staff's preferences. She always made sure to schedule full-time benefited employees alongside part-time employees, which meant that everyone had to work nights and weekends on a regular basis. Part of this was to ensure that there was always a healthy mix of experience levels on the desk, and part of it was to not exploit part-time employees. "You want me to schedule only flex on Friday nights and Saturdays so that the benefited people could have a break? No dice!" she laughed (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022). This statement was a perfect encapsulation of the blunt but caring attitude that endeared her to me, her staff, and her patrons.

### *Collection Development*

Mrs. H had the standard interpretation of collection development that I've learned in my program: provide for the needs of your majority, but seek to have a broad collection that represents and meets the needs of your minority population. Living and working with an overwhelming religious majority has greatly determined her concerns, specifically because she buys romance. "We probably purchase far more cute, sweet, proper, inspirational, Christian kind of romances than a lot of other libraries do. That's the obvious thing, and they're easy to buy, even though I don't care to read them. But what's not obvious? What can I do to provide a well-rounded collection? I don't need to buy every novel that's written these days that has a lesbian couple or a gay couple. But I do need to look around, and I do need to find the best, because I have patrons in my population who are interested in reading those books" (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022). Most of her purchasing budget goes to the Christian romances, but I know from my previous work with her that she spends plenty of time, attention, and money on finding high quality romances that reflect her minority readers.

*Patron Interactions*

As always, Mrs. H loves her tools. She said it's important to know how to use your tools, not only to assist you as you help patrons, but so that you can sell the tool itself to said patrons. "You have to know how NoveList works so that you can use it to help you do your job. However, you're not doing your job well if you don't take the opportunity to enable them to use this tool on their own. You're spending all that money for that dang database, so teach them how to use it!"

(J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022)

When asked what surprised her about her highly homogenous service population, Mrs H said, "What surprised me most about reader's advisory is how much people surprised me" (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022). She warned that we can easily fall into the trap that we know what our readers want, and they consistently prove us wrong. Mrs. H said our biases can creep in most when we work with people we know personally. She told the story of an older, super devout woman she knew from church who asked for romance recommendations. Mrs. H assumed that she'd want one of the many of the sweet and clean romances checked out by women similar to this patron. However, this woman eventually made it clear that she specifically came in looking for a "dirty, spicy" book! Our biases can work in the opposite direction as well, where we make assumptions about someone's personal life based on their reading choices. When patrons asked her for romance books with no "bad" stuff, meaning sex, she often found herself imagining these patrons to be repressed. As someone who loves a "spicy" romance, she found it difficult to understand and empathize with these patrons who disliked something she saw as core to the genre. However, she learned that this attitude got in the way of her providing the best service she could. Mrs. H had to regularly remind herself that a) it's not

her job to make people more comfortable reading about sex and b) many people who read clean romances have healthy and fulfilling sex lives of their own and just don't want to read about it.

*Conclusion*

Mrs. H repeatedly highlighted two things for me: the importance of resources and the necessity of experience. We're obviously in class to learn about RA, but we'll never learn everything about every possible situation. However, we don't need to be scared if we utilize our tools and keep practicing. "There's the academic understanding that gives you the framework, and then there's the experience that gives you confidence" (J. Heckert, personal communication, October 28, 2022). I always loved chatting with and learning from her at work, and I was grateful to have another chance at that with this assignment.