Stress Versus Libraries Edited Interview Transcripts

Robin Bradford with Rebecca Reeves 2/11/25

Rebecca Reeves So for the first question, just so we can have it all on record, what is your name and job title?

Robin Bradford My name is Robin Bradford and I am a Collection Development Librarian at Pierce County Library. … What I do is I'm a selector. … I select books for the library.

RR Other than that is there anything else you … do?

RB No, that is my forty-hour-a-week job. I buy books. That's what I do.

… It is the best job I cannot lie. I've done lots of other things but once I found out that that was an actual job that you could do, I did everything that I could to get there.

RR Kudos to you. So with that, have you noticed stress affecting what people read or … how they interact in the library?

RB Yes and no. So the downside of my job is I don't have a lot of contact with the public. I have contact with them through things like patron requests, which they directly send … to us. So I have that contact, but I don't have a lot of contact across the desk um with patrons.

But I have seen in requests, and in hearing from frontline staff who do have that direct contact [with people], … the more stressful the life is, the more they look for things that are not stressful. So … that's one group. There's also a group that looks for things that are extra stressful because that makes what they're going through seem not so bad. Like if you are having whatever issue, a lot of people will reach for a horror novel because that is just the ultimate in stress, and at least that's not you. At least you're not being chased by a serial killer or a killer clown or … a demon or whatever.

So it's kind of interesting that we're seeing the rise in horror, which is huge right now, and has been for the past couple years. [There's a] rise in non-Christian-based gentle reads. … Before that, when people, [were] especially [looking] for romance, which is kind of my specialty, [it was] a lot of gentle romance where it's just very sweet and very nice and there's no on-the-page sex or anything like that. It was all Christian fiction. And so people were like, okay, I want this, but I don't want you to talk to me about Christ.

[People asked] where do I go, and before, like maybe, the past few years you had to go to like classics. … That was pretty much it. You didn't really have very many to choose from and what has really risen as well. So it's like … both groups of people are looking for something and then you see publishers publishing it and people buying it.

RR That's a lot of change. … Have you noticed if any of that's tracked with … any of the current events going on?

RB I think it tracks the whole thing. I don't know that it tracks a specific current event. The more everything is shaky, like you can't rely on whatever you used to rely on, the more people reach for a comfort read or something that will take their mind off of what is happening. So I don't know that it tracks a … specific event, but it tracks the overall mood of wherever people are. … It's hard because I feel like we've been in this mood since COVID-19. And so, before COVID-19 so probably about 2016, the last presidential election, the first Trump administration, I feel like people were because … when you toss norms away, people feel unsettled. And so they're looking for something that's not that, and so from that time, and then to COVID when everything was really unsettled and then after that, I don't feel like we've come out of it. I feel like we're still in whatever mood we're in right now.

RR … You make a really good point with that. And so speaking of mood does it affect your own personal reading or how you use the library?

RB I absolutely am a mood reader. … It makes it really great because I have access to a lot of things. So for whatever mood I'm in I can usually find something, but also if I have a project that I need to do where I can't read whatever I want, I have to read for review or I don't do many reviews for this reason. Or … whatever it might be for work, then it gets me into trouble because I don't want to read it. I want to read what I'm in the mood for. …

RR So if you don't mind me asking, … when you're sad [do] you read this certain genre, and when you're happy … What mood [are you] in for what?

RB I don't think of it that way. I … think of it as … I'm mostly an e-reader so I will look at what is on my Kindle or my iPad or wherever, and [ask] do I feel like that? No. Do I feel like that? Maybe. And so it's not necessarily linked to how I'm feeling, at least not in a way that I recognize. It's mostly just do I feel like reading this today? And there have been times when I will pick a book by an author I love and I know whatever they write, I'm gonna love it, and I'll pick it up and I'll be like, "Nope. Nope, not today," and I'll close it and, you know, I'm able now to tell the difference between I hate this book and I don't like this book today, but I should like it at a different time.

RR No, I totally get that. Like that was literally me last night. I sat on the floor in front of my bookshelf and I said what am I in the mood for reading? I was going through every single book. So no, totally relate.

RB If we like whatever it is, I just don't feel like it today.

RR Honestly, yeah. I was like, Oh, these are all new authors. You know, let's look at them. Oh, I just got these, but some of these just don't sound that good. And I'm like, you know, it's okay, tomorrow will be different.

RB it's hard to articulate that to people who don't understand, they think when you like reading and this is a genre that you like and it's an author that you like, [they wonder] why don't want to read? It's like, yes to all of those things but..

RR It's like I'm just not in the mood!

RB I'm just not in the mood for that today.

RR I totally get that. So, in general, what do you see as the future of libraries and … readers' advisory and what [books] you're gonna be buying for libraries?

RB So, I have kind of a negative view.

RR Okay

RB Right now we're kind of in the AI age, and I'm seeing more books that have some AI component to them whether it's writing or narration and … so for me, what's in the future is finding a way to avoid those so that I can buy the work of actual people or people who are writing it themselves and not with the help of AI. So that's kind of my negative [view] of what's coming in the future. As far as what people are looking for, I don't know. I'm waiting for the fantasy romance bubble to burst.

There's so many right now and these things happen in waves, so you know it's going to happen. It happened with your normal romance, it happened with, you know, historical romance. It's kind of at a low right now. So these things do come in phases. I'm waiting for people to hit their … breaking point with fantasy romance. It hasn't happened yet, so people still love it, so as long as that's the case, that's what's gonna be purchased.

I think with this new administration, a lot of people are going dystopian. And so that kind of took a break in the past couple years and I feel like it's coming back maybe in a different way. I don't know yet. I'm seeing a few more dystopian books that I've seen the past couple years and so I wonder if that is a thing that's coming back. A lot of them focused on climate issues which were big for a while and then kind of went away because nobody wanted dystopian fiction when we were living in these times. And so now I wonder if people … have had these books sitting around and they are finally finishing them and trying to get them sold. So I'm really curious as to what might be next. I don't know, and I'm not great at predicting. I mostly sit around and go, "I didn't see that coming." I didn't see a horror boom coming.

RR I kind of agree with … dystopias coming back, because you're hearing about more things kind of … like "Divergent-y" themed and stuff like that … coming back. …

RB [Dystopias] had a little moment and then went away and I feel like … it wasn't as big as it could have been. … And so I feel like there's some things there that can still happen and more ways to think about how the world might end and what happens after.

RR Oh yeah, definitely. I can see that coming up [in] the next couple of years. So that's going to be interesting to see.

So I know you don't really deal with the people or anything, but again you work in a library, so I was just kind of wondering if any stressful and traumatic events have impacted the type of [library] programming and events. …

RB I don't really see a lot of programming. Most of the programming that I've seen has just been authors coming in. So I don't know what kind of community-impact programming that we've been having.

RR No, I totally understand. I just thought that'd be a shot in the dark and I was like, you know what? It doesn't hurt to try anyways.

RB It doesn't hurt to try! I'm trying to think back. I was actually a Public Services Librarian during 9/11. … And I'm trying to think back to what we did then. And I don't… and I don't know that we had a lot of programming around that. People would gather in the meeting rooms and they would have community gatherings, but not anything library-forward. It was mostly people just coming together on their own.

RR … That totally makes sense. Well with that we'll go a different direction with the stressors. … How [have] the stressors in your life impacted what you're reading, if you feel comfortable enough to talk about it?

RB So I was one of those very weird people that during COVID I could not read anything new. And that was absolutely terrible. So that was how I reacted to stress, I guess. Like I could reread things and I did a lot of rereading. So I guess that was my comfort read[ing] stuff that I already knew; I already knew that I loved it and I still acquired a ton of books. I was a book hoarder, but read very little. … It was probably a lot to somebody else … because everybody reads differently. But for me, it was not very much at all and it kind of bothered me because I wanted to [read]. I would see something, it would sound amazing and I wanted to read it and when I went to look for what I was in the mood in, it was never that. It was never anything new. It was always this book I've read 12 times and I love it. … I've also had it where work stress makes me read more.

So I didn't want to do anything, except read all the things on my Kindle. So I like it when that happens. It's just not that often.

RR I'm definitely like the first type. Whenever something stressful is going on, I tend to not read. If I do read, I read something where I know what's going to happen. So I'm like, "Oh, I'm not stressed out about it. I know what's happening." So I totally get that.

RB Yeah, I mean there's something to that. They're called comfort reads for a reason. … They make you feel safe and happy and that's what I would want. … I think it depends on the stress. So work stress. It's like, yeah, at the end of the day, this isn't my life, it's just work. And so I don't feel the same as [when] I can't go outside, you know? … I have to wear a mask, I have to wipe

down my groceries. So I think it's the type of stress that affects whether or not I can read anything new. …

I would say one thing that stress does is increase library usage overall. And so we see people come again, it might depend on the kind of stress too. So I'm thinking of … 2007 through 2010, the Great Recession. The people flocked to the library because they were trying to save money. … Having to put things in, in order of, you know, can we afford this, can we not? … It was a time of Netflix but with actual disks and not just digital. … All of those things that cost money that they couldn't afford, but libraries had DVDs, … music CDs, and … all the things that you wanted to still use and still have, but didn't want to pay the subscription fee. …

We saw a huge increase in the number of people who were coming in [and] getting … DVDs … and they never came in for books, but that sometimes led them to other things, so they would go to programs … because they saw an ad for it in the library when they were getting their DVDs. So that's one way stress helped increase overall usage. And then people would see that we had books that they didn't know we had at that time.

I was in Indianapolis and urban fiction was huge but people didn't know that we had them and so they discovered it because they came in for something else. And then we saw this big boom in circulation of urban fiction … and then … word of mouth brought people in, increased the amount of money we spent and so it was just a big circle and now those people are library users and they've moved to eBooks.

It really is just when you don't have the money for things, you remember that the library is there. And then what you choose to do with that can change. You come in like, “I'm just gonna get DVDs for the weekend.” And suddenly you have a stack of books. And your kid has a stack of books. And, you know, you're getting tax forms and you're doing all the things that you didn't know [you could do]. … From stress! It started from stress that we didn’t have money to do the things that we used to do and so we were sad about that and it turned into something that is now a lifelong habit.

Kaite Stover with Avery Alexander 2/12/25

Avery Alexander So I guess [let's] start out with the basics. If you just give me your name and also your official job title, so that we can make sure that we attribute you correctly.

Katie Stover [My name is] Katie Stover, I am the Director of Reader Services for the Kids City Public Library.

AA Can you go into some detail about sort of the work you do and have done in libraries, just anything that you think is relevant to understand who you are as a library professional.

KS Sure! I've been doing library work professionally since 1992. I started at Emporia Public Library as the Adult Services Coordinator. I stepped right out of library school into a department head, professional level position. I think I was lucky that I was able to do that, and then from there, I did a little bit of everything. This was a job that was overseeing the adult services staff. I was responsible for training … all new staff. We did reference, we did readers' advisory, [and] we did interlibrary loan out of my department. I did some cataloging, collection development, lots and lots of programming and some budgeting - not a lot. I didn't learn an awful lot about budgeting on that first job.

Then I went to Kansas City, Kansas Public Library, which is in the Kansas City Metro Area, where I served as the Fiction Librarian. They had a reference librarian staff, and I was in charge of the fiction collection. So this was in, I think 2000. This was before many libraries centralized their collection development. So one of the enticements to get library students or people holding MLS [degrees] into reference positions was to give them some collection development responsibilities as well as programming. …

In my tenure there, collections became centralized, and I was a big fan of that from the very beginning, because while, as much as I loved collection development, I did recognize that it could be a huge time suck on a public facing librarian. So then … I went over to … a larger library, the in the metro area, and there I was the Customer Services Manager, and then that title changed to reader Services Manager, which didn't mean a whole lot at KCPL at the time, because it was a but I was the recognized readers advisory person on staff. And in that job, I mostly oversaw the circulation staff at Central Circulation. I did an awful lot of that work, and then I was promoted to Director of Reader Services. It was a brand new department, and I was a department of one. And in that department, I was responsible for readers' advisory based training at the system level. I coordinated the systems' book groups. I helped train library staff to be facilitators of library sponsored book groups. I started [a] program where KCPL became supporters of community book groups, so we had library sponsored [ones] which were the ones that were held in our branches, and. And library staff played a significant role. And then we had library supported [ones], which were community book groups that used our resources, relied on us for help in selecting materials and getting materials, but didn't necessarily meet in our local branches or use library staff.

I also worked a great deal on large scale system wide reading projects. So that includes community wide reading projects like summer reading. We had a winter reading program for adults. We did a lot of NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] Big Reads. I was also part of our public affairs team, and I was the library representative... Majority of our public affairs team are people with marketing, graphic design and writing [experience]. We [also] hired writers. I was the person that taught them how to library everything that they did. So, I did a great deal of programming, bringing in a lot of authors for author events. It seemed like that was the majority of my job - doing a lot of public facing PR for the library. … Our public affairs team, since none of them had an MLS, when they needed someone to talk to the media, I was the person that they would send.

I did a lot of community library promotions, going out and speaking to community groups about what the library services were. We do a lot of reading related programming with our cultural institutions. Whenever we [had] a lot of theater companies in town [and] whenever they needed somebody to do like a talk back from a literary perspective, I would do those. The local radio program had a book doctor segment, and I did that. I would do specialty reading groups with other cultural institutions like the Kansas City Ballet, our Lyric Opera, the National World War One Museum, [and] the Nelson Atkins museum. I also coordinated a special pop up book group. It was called, at the time, the FYI Book Group. And we did that in partnership with the Kansas City Star. … I would select the book and gather readers who do not know each other from across the metro area. The Kansas City Star would run a profile of the author, a snippet from the book, invite people to join the community discussion, and then I would coordinate that and facilitate the discussion, and I would write the follow up piece that summarized the discussion. I would invite the authors in to join us, usually virtually, and I moved that book group around all the time, so I did a lot of that.

I was the library's representative at a lot of conferences. My library particularly liked the national profile that I brought to them, and … they were generous enough to invest in that and send me to conferences. I did an awful lot of content creation for the library[‘s] social media. As social media began to bloom, and blog posts, so whenever they needed reading or collection-related content, public affairs would depend on me for that. …

I'll be honest, it's a unicorn of a job. It's also one that I've been able to craft to meet my strengths. And that was what … the library director who created this position wanted. Now I am still [the] Director of Reader Services, but I have a staff of two, and now … we can focus on things like really intense training for branch staff. We can do training in the way of like, what is readers’ advisory? How do you do it? We can do genre deep dives. [Right now] we are crafting … display guidelines for all of our branches. We are heavily involved in the summer reading program. … And our library has since brought on a new venture, the Heartland Book Festival. So [our] reader services team … [is] very involved in that. We are usually charged with arranging all of the programming that happens at the festival and some author events.

AA I was just wondering if you had a perspective as a reader services [or] readers advisory librarian about how you've seen stress and mood sort of influencing the way people approach you, or approach readers' advisory or read? …

KS … One of the programs that I started in KCPL as [the] Director of Reader Services is our Shelf Help Program. And if you work with Seattle Public, it's Seattle's. What do they call it? Five?

AA Yeah, Your Next Five. …

KS They're wonderful. … So we are in our third iteration of updating our Shelf Help Service. But what I have noticed … from 2016 to about 2020 folks [wanted] materials … on their government, more materials on social justice issues, [and] more materials on community resource[s]. So they would … fill out the form, and they would tell us in the boxes what they've been reading, and get very specific about what they wanted. As soon as the pandemic hit …. everybody's stress level went through the roof, but that's because they were also afraid. So from about 2016 to 2019 where everyone [was] … confused [about] what [was] going on with Trump in office. … They just wanted to learn more about government, and they wanted to learn more about how local government worked, and they were interested in information.

And then in 2020, as soon as the pandemic hit, they needed escapist reading. I did not see very many requests for nonfiction narrative popular science. People still wanted memoir, but they were looking more for gentle memoir. I was seeing as far as fiction went, … I saw a great deal of gentle, warm romance. [I] didn't see as much horror. [I] saw … historical fiction, science fiction and fantasy. Probably more fantasy than science fiction [and] definitely more historical romance.

And people would get [that] … because it was a form, and it's not that it was anonymous, but they knew no one was seeing it. They'd get honest and say, I need something to escape. They all wanted escape reading, however they defined escape reading. So I was also giving folks a lot of thrillers, and I guess pop fiction, [but] not so much literary fiction. I wouldn't get asked for that, but I would get asked for pop fiction that didn't fit in a genre, but that was maybe family-related. Found family themes, things like that. As soon as the Black Lives Matter movement really hit, in May of that year, I had a lot of folks asking for more fiction by authors of color, a lot of nonfiction, [and] a lot of anti-racist nonfiction. We couldn't keep [up] at the time. We couldn't keep white fragility on the shelf. We couldn't keep *Warmth of Other Suns* on the shelf. … Author Isabel Wilkerson, her books were going like that. All the popular nonfiction at the time [were] going. I did a conscious search for pop fiction from authors of color that would fit people's genre … because sometimes folks would just check the "interested in diverse voices," and we weren't quite sure what that meant … but … we're going to change that term. …

We weren't trying to check the demographics of the reader. We wanted to see folks' comfort level, what they were interested in, what they would want to read, and how we could expand their reading horizons. So I saw a lot of folks who were more interested in reading works from international authors, Indigenous authors, black authors, [and] Asian authors. Then knowing

that, I would try to fit their genre and appeal to elements that they liked, we … would use NoveList a lot. …

So now we are seeing a lot … [of] return to just escapist a little less. Everyone's taking a break right now. So I'm not seeing anyone ask for books …I with social justice themes or heavy literary themes. We're seeing folks want more gentle, warm, escapist literature. Romanticism is through the roof. That is not a genre that I particularly care for, but I know all the romantic authors to suggest. I'm also seeing larger requests for LGBTQ characters, characters experiencing mental health issues, neurodivergent characters, [and] differently abled characters. … We have someone on staff who's very well versed in … in novels or works that feature deaf characters [or] deaf culture. …

We look for books that meet folks' appeal preferences and we don't take into consideration the race, the gender, [or] anything when it comes to the author. … We provide a wide range of genres and authors who write and fit the preferences of the reader, but as far as the tone goes, … I'm serving a mostly urban or ex-urban population, it's not so much. It's not extremely progressive where we are, but it is not wildly conservative [either]. …
So as far as the mood goes, I can't [say] that's the mood regarding what they're reading. But the other move that I'm seeing is that people are turning to reading as an escape, as a leisure pursuit. I run into more people in the community [and] in the library for whom reading doesn't feel like a shameful, nerdy activity. They're proud, nerdy. … I'm running into more people who want to join book groups, not because they're looking for like minded folks, but because they want to socialize, and reading is a good way to do it.

AA I am curious to know since you've been doing sort of library work since the 90s, right? Is what you said. I think you mentioned 1992.

KS Yeah 1992 was my first professional library job.

AA Have you seen a change from when you first started? Or have you always sort of noticed specific trends depending on certain times and certain moments of stress that have informed the way people read? Or are you just now noticing very distinct patterns?

KS When I first got into readers' advisory work, I did notice that the times of year had something to do with it. So folks were more apt to read those thicker books, [those] big, chewy literary novels. They wanted those in the winter. And by winter I mean January, February, when they're hunkering down. … They want light, gentle things [and] … non stressful things around the holidays. More frothy, escapey, breezy reads in the summer. I did see that, but I also saw folks in the summer in Emporia, when I first started doing readers' advisory, that they would pick up the book award winners, more likely in the summer.

I was also working in Emporia when Oprah started her book group, so I would see an awful lot of people [who] wanted serious fiction in the fall, when the big fall books would come out. For some reason, … I always thought of March and April as a free beach read, like the legal thriller

season. So that was when John Grisham, Mary Higgins Clark, and Richard Patterson … would all drop a brand new book. Tammy Hogue and [Scott Turow] were all writing suspense, legal suspense. And after a while, I just thought, well, it's spring; here comes the new Mary Higgins Clark [book]. She wants to make sure she's first one out of the gate when it comes to beach reads, And then Daniel Steele would just publish whenever she bloody well felt like it.

Romances. I would see an awful lot of romances come out in the spring too. And those are just publishing trends, which meant that my readers were reading these lighter things in the spring and moving into the summer. … I noticed … [that] they would gravitate towards historical fiction in the fall. … As the year wears on … it tends to move towards more historic, heritage holidays.

AA … And besides books, you also mentioned that you do a lot of programming work. I was wondering also … how have you noticed stress and mood influencing the sort of programming that people participate in or that you offer? Has it ever influenced the sort of book groups you choose to host or the events that you choose to have?

KS Oh, yes, I can. First, I'll talk about how time of year and mood impacts how we do book groups at KCPL and where we do really good work, because it's very the help is very hands on. … So I learned from working with some [other] groups that if I wanted them to read something a little more serious, … I could do that in January or February or September and October. That was just when people would start pulling away from outside activities so I could give them something a little more serious. They could focus on it in January and February when … they're going to be inside. And sometimes it was just … a thicker book [because] I knew they had more time to read. And sometimes it would be not necessarily really dramatic and tragic, but something more thoughtful, something chewy, or something a little more intellectual.

For the summer, we wouldn't shy away from discussable things, but we would find more genre related writing. So I might find [a way] to introduce genres that my book groups wouldn't typically read. … It feels like everybody's a little looser, a little more flexible with their time and their life in the warm weather months. So they're more willing to … [be] open. … So I could use the summer months to have folks read shorter things that are … still worth … discuss[ing]. … Say a graphic novel. I would almost always do a format change … or switch things up, … [in] July or August, when they could take a little more time to read it. I would usually skip December, because everybody is very busy. So, … we would tend to read something a little more serious in October and November, and then we would [use] December [as a] break. We might give out at the December meeting, the big chewy book for them to read in January and February.

… That sort of system worked well. We would try to stagger it so our groups would read fiction [or] nonfiction. … Like we'd do a memoir. I knew that memoirs did really well late spring or late summer, but it was good to do a memoir after we had read something really heavy in early spring. … Or if we had read something rather light and fanciful in the summer, then a memoir was a good segue book in August, for more serious reading in September, October, [and] November. Memoirs are [also] a good segue book from the really heavy literary reading we

might do in January, February, [and] March. We would do a memoir in, say, April or May, and that would lead us into more genre experimentation. …

As far as events go, I am prone to scheduling the serious topics in the fall. I like to schedule authors with offbeat topics in the summer and then tie them into our summer reading program. So I can always find a way to do that. In December, we don't bring in too many authors, but if we do, we bring in local authors, because then we don't have to worry about [the] weather. … So with December authors, we bring in someone local. We kind of tie it into the gift giving season. … We have done February [and] we stick with the Heritage Month guidelines. So we will focus heavily at KCPL on bringing authors that help us celebrate Black History Month or Women's History Month in March.

We do have a general policy at KCPL that every month is Black History Month, … is Women's History Month, and … is Pride Month. So we will try to focus on particular historical topics, but we don't just front load February … with our black speakers, or just women in March. … We can focus on black history in February, but we have to have programs that appeal and represent throughout the whole year. We will always do something for the heritage month when we can and then when I want to bring in someone to talk about the arts, like music or movies, I know that I can get away with that in July and August, because those are lighter months.

… This year, I'm going to bring in someone to talk about the first stunt woman in Hollywood, and I'm going to schedule her for June. Then I will look for something movie-related or music-related [to go with it]. There [are] lots of books on that. [We'll be] bringing those authors in June, … July, and August. And then we'll start looking in September and October at more of the government issues, more social issues, and the speakers for those topics tend to prefer those months. …

We'll do serious art topics in the fall, because it just seems like right after Labor Day, that's when the arts season begins, movies, theater, symphony, ballet, everybody's arts calendar starts heavy then. Then in October, because we're doing the Heartland Book Festival one more time, [there's] always a blend of authors, different genres, different formats, different subject areas. We will pull back a little bit on our big author events so the entire staff can focus on our Heartland Book Festival, which will happen [in] the middle of the month.

AA … What do you see as sort of the future of readers' advisors … and the future of the library? … How do you … plan to continue providing these services? Do you see yourself making any changes to adapt to … things that might happen in the future? …

KS My team is brand new. We will be a year old at the end of this month. … Once I had a team, I started to think five years out, what does that look like for me? One of the goals I have is to establish … a solid KCPL supported readers' advisory training program. We want [it] to be part of the onboarding for new staff, and we are going to be working on that this year. … At the end of this month, we will have display guidelines that could be used across the system so that the displays all have a cohesive look. They don't necessarily have to be branded. … We are not going to dictate what branch staff can put on display. We are just going to give them guidelines

for what should be in your display. Please don't forget your authors of color. Please don't forget graphic novels and young adult work. Please include everything. Please include audiobooks and go grab a DVD. …

We're thinking about establishing a readers' advisory in-service, and so I'm going to be carving out money for that where it's part educational [and] part entertainment. For staff, we will be establishing a book group training program. We hope to do that … next October, because October is National Book Group Month. We want to use October to celebrate book groups and expose the community to the services the library has to offer.

As far as programming goes, our public affairs department has always [had] programs that focus on politics, history, local history, social issues, and cultural issues. … We are making great efforts at KCPL to be as balanced as we possibly can without going to the extreme on either side. …

KS … I taught a readers' advisory class once … in 2008 for MU in Missouri. I don't think ESU [has] one. I don't think MU in Columbia has a readers' advisory program or class [and] that would be really helpful. And actually, we need two. One is just readers' advisory. How to be good [at it] … in your public library, and then the other class should be how to program well with book[s] at your library. So how to do a good book group, how to do a good author event, [or] how to do how to run a good system-wide reading program. A lot of how to turn any program in your library into something that is bookish, how to keep collections front and center in as many services, events, programs, and workshops a library offers, because that's what people go to the library for. It's the first thing they think of. Even if people are coming to the library more often than not for computer access, you still ask them, "What is the first thing that comes to mind when I say library" and they'll say "book." Whether or not that's what they go to the library for. …

I also think readers advisory is important in library school [because] that is what the majority of the public goes to a public library for. Reference is great, but I see [a need for] more reference … in the college libraries. In a public library, people want to talk about what they're reading, watching, [or] listening, and it's more important for a library to become a trusted public institution, and you can start by doing that when people can trust you to make good suggestions, because you listen to their preferences. Google doesn't listen to your preferences. Amazon and Netflix aren't listening to your preferences. They're not evaluating it or listening to you the way librarians will do.

Claire Scott with Rebecca Reeves 2/16/2025

Rebecca Reeves So the first question is, what exactly is your name and your job title?

Claire Scott [I'm] Claire Scott and I am the Teacher Librarian at Lincoln High School in Seattle Public Schools.

RR And can you kind of describe the work you do?

CS I can, so what I do at the high school is I'm the librarian for a public high school of about 1850 students. As a librarian, I do everything library-related. So I manage the collection. [I manage] ordering, weeding, curating, et cetera. I teach classes on … research, intellectual freedom, media literacy, information literacy, literature appreciation, finding a book that you love. … I do that in collaboration with teachers across subject areas. … I work with them and figure out what they are doing in their curriculum and how … library skills tie into it, and then I teach those classes.

I also do a lot of readers' advisory and a lot of sort of the everyday things that happen. I am essentially on a reference desk from, if I'm not actively teaching, from about 8:30 in the morning until about 6 PM, solo, mostly. … I talk a lot about books. I also am unfortunately managing a lot of technology and that kind of thing. … My library has a finite group of patrons. …

It's great, I love it. I'm honestly living the dream. Prior to that I was at the Seattle Public Library from 2012 through 2019, and then before that, I was at the Oakland Public Library, and I was also a K5 elementary school librarian. So I've done readers' advisory in … all of those spaces.

RR … So, with all of that, have you noticed stress affecting what people read or how they interact with the library?

CS Yes, sort of. Yes. I mean, high schoolers are pretty much always stressed. They're a very stressed group of humans. … There's been lots of waves … [since] I've been a librarian since 2006. So there have been lots of different things. This current level of political stress, I have only been in the school library for this so I don't know how it's affecting the public library. In the school library, you're thinking in terms of reading, especially, right?

RR Yes, or just in general, like whichever you want to touch on, but definitely reading.

CS … My students are stressed in general. Some of them are especially more stressed. There's a lot of … political talk. I'm also the advisor for our GSA, Saga. So I spend a lot of time with a lot of LGBTQ youth so their stress levels are particularly high right now. I've got lots of kids in general in times of stress, but definitely now in particular, who are leaning towards comfort reads and rereads, which is something that I deeply encourage, and cozy.

There's also, … I don't know how it's related to stress, but I have noticed that in the last couple of years, … my biggest asks have been cozy, especially cozy fantasy and horror, so like two very different ends of that spectrum and they cannot get enough, especially of horror, which I

think is really interesting that those are two different directions that people tend to go when they're stressed with the world around them. …

In terms of using the library differently, [they don't] really, just more. So, in a high school library, it's a little bit different than the public library, obviously. But one of the things is that we're kind of a space within the school. … Kids don't really have free periods anymore … but there are times when, if they're just super overwhelmed or … dealing with things like panic attacks … they will either try to cut class and come to the library, or they'll get a pass and come to the library. And that is definitely happening a lot right now. It's pretty consistent. Like it's not new. This has been happening for a long time. I think there might be a little bit of an uptick in the usage in that way, but it has not yet become enormously significant as a difference, but it is something that is kind of constant and honestly there has been so much stress … [and] the underlying stress since COVID has been very, very high for kids.

RR Have you noticed certain genres coming in and out of popularity? Because you mentioned the horror and comfort reads, but are there maybe just certain genres in general? Are they tracking with these current events? Or these stressors?

CS Horror definitely, has definitely come back hard. I think that when I say cozy, I mostly mean cozy fantasy. Those cozy fantasy reads definitely have had an uptick in asks for them. [With] romance primarily cozy romance fantasy. … Romantasy, obviously, has been in its moment for a while. I haven't seen any kind of stress related uptick in those to be honest, they're not as big with my patron population as they are elsewhere.

Queer books definitely cross genres. … I have noticed a lot of asks in the last few months of books "to make me cry." … [What] they mean when they ask that, they mostly mean realistic fiction, romance. So not genre elements. … I don't know if this is stress related. [I see] definitely a lot of true crime.

… There are people who study AO3 [Archive of Our Own] and who look at trends. … There are actually a number of people at UW that study that. I have a feeling that a lot of the reading trends and needs would be reflected more in fanfic reading. … I will talk with my students about their fic reading in a very limited capacity. So, you know, we talk about it very vaguely, but I have never asked, what are you reading? And I don't recommend [this] unless there's something that I know has really tame content and is [about] something that they're super interested in … and it's already come up in conversation.

So I don't have a sense that, for my students, reading in a very intentional way. But that would be really interesting to see, actually. A lot of those emotional readings that my students do where they're reading, especially not for plot, but … to meet an emotional need. … A lot of them are fic readers for that reason. …

I just mean that they are also reading fic along with the rest of us. I think it would be really fascinating, actually, to see. … I'd guess that, yeah, like the rest of the world, I know for sure that my kids are reading a ton of fic, a ton of webcomics, and that they're reading one that they

can get really deep into and have … that emotional catharsis. And that's not new but it might be more acute now. …

RR So, how does mood affect your personal reading?

CS Oh, great question that I can answer. So I'm a mood reader. … I need to find something that matches whatever my gut is like, “I desperately need this right now.” … As my stress level has increased I have been really drawn to nonfiction. Especially … memoirs of folks who fought in the Civil Rights Movement, [and] that kind of thing. I'm finding that those are ones that I'm really drawn to and wanted to talk about a lot as well. Also, weirdly, things that are entertaining and light, but not [super emotional]. … Normally as a reader,, I'm a reader who could not care very much about … about plots. I like settings, I really like characters. I'm there for the emotional needs primarily. … I like a plot but I don't need it to be there if it's a book where virtually nothing happens. … As long as the emotional, like the emotional plot is significant and draws me in.

But I've noticed that … I've been really wanting things that are more plotty and have less of an emotional … hook. So like I've been reading Agatha Christie for the first time since I was 12. … I think it's because my engagement with it doesn't demand much for me emotionally. I'm kind of just along for the ride. Also, I'm not somebody who needs to solve a mystery when I'm reading. In general, I don't like suspense in my books. I don't like thrillers. I can read mysteries as long as they're not suspenseful. It really amps up my anxiety, so high suspense reads are not fun for me. … Authors, I've been really trying to find more that are either like or by authors that I know and trust so that I know what I'm going to get. And sometimes that's working well and sometimes it's not. I'm discarding a lot. I'm starting and stopping. If something is not grabbing me, I'm just like, “Oh God, I can’t.”

RR … So, in like, your roles and … just in general, what has changed about books or readers’ advisory?

CS Oh, in my career as a librarian?

RR Yes, just in general, or if you want to, you can focus on your current job.

CS That's such a great question. I do a ton of RA in a lot of different spaces and so probably looking at the big picture is easiest for me. One thing that has changed a lot since the early days … is that in general, the stigma around genre has lessened. … In general, people are more willing to talk about reading romance, more willing to talk about reading sci-fi.

People are also reading more genres, I think. Romance readers have always read voraciously … and that is not something that has changed. I think there are more romance readers out there now than there were a lot of people who are willing to read in the genre when previously they would have dismissed it primarily because of a combination of internalized misogyny and stigma. Then also the fact that there really has been a massive change in what romance reads and looks like. … If you read kind of old school romance, it really is, tonelly, so different. And I think that's brought in a lot more readers … who might have not read it previously because they were like, it's all bodice rippers or it's all alpha males and, you know, wilting ladies or whatever.

Which, you know, I would argue it never really was, but they're definitely in terms of thinking about consent in terms of thinking about who are the other characters around the main character. Looking at the importance of other relationships and friendships, like those things are much more front and center, and very intentional. And obviously, in general romance is much more diverse now than it was and that has been an unalloyed good. Like … it has made the genre vastly richer and just better in every way. … And, and I think that's also true with science fiction and fantasy readers.

I think in general … people read a lot. People read a lot for comfort now and for fun. And I think that this is not a recent change. … I really think that the rise of Bookstagram and BookTok and just in general, our cultural conversation about reading for pleasure. … People are willing to talk about, “This is what I like reading,” not just, “This is what I'm reading because it sounds good or was a New York Times bookseller” … or whatever. … And I do think a lot more people are just reading now as an escape, as comfort. … There's a lot of great stuff out there. And it's also really accessible in a lot of ways. …

I have noticed just completely anecdotally in my school, that I have an interesting racial divide between what kids reach for comfort and what they're asking for a lot. I have a lot of white kids reading cozy fantasy and a lot of queer kids reading cozy fantasy. And I have a lot, really all kids, but I have a lot of especially a Black kids reading manga. And not like graphic novels in general. … That's definitely a generalization that I would never be like, white kids like this and black kids like this. But I have noticed a distinct demographic preference in what is getting checked out among my very limited patron group.

RR … So you kind of talked about the [present] and the past, well, what do you see as the future of RA and school libraries?

CS Well, that's a great question. I have a depressing answer and a hopeful answer, I guess.

My depressing answer is … what I worry will happen in school libraries and I know is happening already and realistically is going to happen. I think that in general librarians are gonna be very hesitant to recommend books that have any content that could be considered in any way controversial. I think that librarians are going to move away from recommending books with diverse characters, books that address race, books of LGBTQI+ characters.

I think kids are still going to find those books. I think readers are still going to find those books, hopefully on their own. But I don't think that they'll be receiving them as much as recommendations, and I think that really sucks. and I think it's that chilling effect of all of the censorship and bans, and then also not just the chilling effect, but the actual legal implications at this point as legislation is changing in certain states. … Six months ago I would have said when it gets to the Supreme Court, it will be struck down. Now I don't know what will happen. But I think that really changes what gets recommended and to whom.

And that I don't know how long that will last. How long we will be in that space of fear and caution. … It's something that I fight against very consciously and have for many years and I

have the privilege to be able to do that. And there are some librarians who I think it's a mixture of privilege, knowledge, the community that you're in, [and] what the laws are. … It's a big stew of reasons that people make choices around what they recommend or not. I do think that, um I think that social media around books will continue to be pretty big.

I think we'll see genres move in it out of fashion as they do in increments. … And I think something else will be on its way in. … Social media … is just enormous in terms of the ways that people find books. And I think that if they don't have a trusted librarian because their librarians have been cut … they're not going to go to the libraries for RA. They're going to go to other spaces. I think that is something that is very unsurprising … as a consequence of all of these different times that we're facing. … Fewer readers have access to librarians to do RA, and then you just get in the habit of not asking librarians for RA. So, yeah, I think that will change.

… I think that libraries … are able to enter into that space with strong social media presences … in those spaces where people actually are and if there continues to be a focus on books and reading, I think that that will help to keep librarians sort of central in that. … I don't think books are going to go anywhere.

… I do think that a thing that's gonna change a lot is that the publishing landscape is already so very white, and the needle has shifted on it a little between 2012 and now. … The books that win awards are less white than they were, but when you look at the Goodreads list … the things that are being published are still not diverse. … We just don't have enough publisher support for authors of color. So that sucks. And I think there's a public perception that it's gotten a lot better. I think that there's a public idea of the percentage of authors of color, especially, and queer authors, that are being published is much higher than it actually is. The perception is off.

I think that this backlash and honestly publishers not feeling the pressure to diversify their shelves means that it's going to be harder and harder for authors who would be marginalized by publishing to be published again. And so I think that, you know, it was a little bit better and now I'm afraid it's gonna get a lot worse.

… I think that people will continue reading. I don't know if people will continue coming to libraries for readers' advisory. I certainly hope they do, and I hope that librarians step up to the job in the way that they can and have. You know, librarians are not universally good at RA. … Everybody has their focus and there's some people who are great at it. I think there's been a lot of gatekeeping that's happened in libraries and some libraries have tried to push back against it, but most have not, where in the idea of defending professionalism, libraries will sometimes … actively stop non-librarians from engaging in reference and RA. And so … if somebody has a question [they] have to direct it to the librarian. … And there are some libraries that enforce that really strictly and there are some libraries that don't. And the justification behind it is, well, you know, you're a trained librarian. … There's a lot of people who are not librarians who are really good at RA. … What I would love to see in the future is to see intentional nurturing and cultivating of the readers' advisory skills and just even opening the door … [to] everybody who works in the library and also remembering that it's a two-way street so building connections between patrons to enrich those book conversations within libraries, right? What do patrons

recommend? What do they recommend to each other? Making spaces for people to talk to each other about books. … Books are the fun part of libraries, right?

And … I think we have seen libraries that are embracing social media and specifically that are embracing social media around books. I think they're really good at bringing in patrons into that conversation and being part of the conversation in that way instead of being like, “Oh, we're experts, we're gonna tell you what to read.” And I think that if we can continue in that direction, but in person as well, that would be good for everyone. I think it will make libraries more relevant. I think it will make us better at RA. …

Sometimes humans, in my experience, are very possessive … about what they see as their areas of expertise. And often that is born out of defensiveness. … I think that one of the most important things that we can do in all areas of librarianship is remember that we are not actually experts in everything. And honestly, most of us are not experts in anything. To approach reference interactions collaboratively with our patrons and with humility, with cultural humility, especially, and readers’ advisors are a really great space to be able to practice doing that because if you're good at RA, then you are listening to recommendations from your patrons all the time. … And, and you are then reading it and using that to grow your knowledge and your practice. …

So with RA, I think we need to be really intentional about when we train. It's not about learning a million books. It's about figuring out how to build relationships, build trust, ask questions, [and] be open to … [making] mistakes sometimes … and listening and learning and really growing your own knowledge, not just in the vacuum of reading book reviews and reading what's hot, but actually just having conversations with readers. …

RR … The last [question] I really want to ask is, is there anything else that you think I should know or anything you want to tell me?

CS Well, … I was talking to my students, and some other adults as well but mostly, my students. I was like, “Okay, y'all, I don't know what they'll ask, but there's a group of UW students that are doing a research project on mood reading, what do you think that we should tell them?” … So they had some strategies they used when they are mood readers, when they are looking for their next thing.

… So one was that … many of my readers have very long TBRs [to be read lists] … so that when they are in a particular mood, they can look at the list and pull from things they already have. …

RR … Is there anything else you wanna tell me?

CS … I think that the joy of talking about books is something that people have gotten to get now, and have spaces for, even if they don't have friends who like what they like. I'm in a weird position in a high school, or in a unique, awesome position in a school where kids are around each other all day every day so they get the kids who talk about books … with each other, and

they love it. But this is something that adults are not around their friends all day and so a lot of adults don't have access to that in the way that kids do.

RR Say, I lucked out and I work with a lot of readers. So we constantly talk about what we read, and it's great.

CS It's great and if you have people around you like your coworkers or your friends and you get to that's amazing. A lot of, I mean, especially, older adults … that are really busy or who have kids or whatever and … don't get to hang with [their] friends very much at all. … And for teens, … they are in school with people they know and most of them have friends that they could see. … I do think that leaning into any spaces to … lead into the pleasure of reading. I think that we've seen a bump in this and hope that it continues to grow.

… I think the challenge will be to continue recommending and reading and pressuring publishers to make sure that we can have access to as diverse a range of books as possible, because I think we're gonna be f------ if we are not deeply intentional about that.

Tim Brennan with Avery Alexander (2/19/25)

Avery Alexander Can you give your name and any job titles [that you have]? …

Tim Brennan I mostly refer to myself as just a librarian.

AA … Do you want Tim … [or] Timothy?

TB Yeah. Tim is good. …

AA So librarian, Tim Brennan. Okay, great. … Can you describe the work that you've done in libraries throughout your career? …

TB … I've had a pretty wide-ranging career, so I've worked in every level of school, elementary, middle, and high school. … I [also] worked for a year in the public library in Prince George's County and I even worked for about three years at Charles Hickey, which is a Correctional Institute here in Maryland for teenage boys. So yeah, I've literally covered, you know, 90% of the waterfront for librarianship. It varies. But everything you do depends on where you're at and what … your population situation is. …

AA … So, I mentioned the point of this whole project is sort of talking about stress and mood and how it affects library usage. And I was really curious how you've seen that throughout your career, in the different spaces that you've worked in?

TB Stress and mood, … that's gigantic … for [both] the students and for the staff, right? Whether it was in a high school where I guess some students sitting [are] at a computer and somebody's got … a cup of coffee or something. If I go over and say, “hey, you know, Joan, you can't have your coffee in here.” If Joan or me is particularly stressed out, a lot more sparks [can] fly. But in general, I would say probably from 2005 or so on, categorically, there was increased stress across the board. … And this happened 2018-19 in the public library. If you just … [go up to] a grown man or woman person to say, “hey, look, you know, you can't have your Big Gulp”; there a lot of times they're already stressed out, and they kind of react spontaneously aggravated that anyone told them they couldn't do something. So I would say that generalized feelings of stress have gotten higher.

People seem to be very easy to set off their strike. And as librarians, whether in the public library, whether it's in a school, whatever level, it was hard. But we, of course, as people that interact with the public, and especially as teachers that are good about this, you learn to really, really pull back. So I could be stressed out but for me, a lot of the things I did was breathing. And believe it or not, you can smile without smiling fully, and if you keep your smile muscles up, it brings your tension down. So I used to have to consciously do this, moving through the hallways, moving into places where there were a lot of activities, and I had to manage my stress constantly. … Sometimes you can't. Sometimes you lose patience too, when you snap at someone, but yeah, it's a constant thing. And for teachers, I know, [and] I'm sure in retail, they

do a lot of this too, but for us, it was literally like a daily thing. … Before you go [into] the building, before you open the door, say [to] yourself, “okay, take a breath. Everybody you're dealing with today, generally speaking, is pretty much on edge, already.”

AA Interesting, and you mentioned 2005, 2018 and 2019 specifically as being moments where you noticed that this kind of ramped up?

TB … Believe it or not, the first few years I started in ‘95 I was at Oxon Hill Middle School for a couple of years. And from ‘95 to 2000 most of the time if I had an interaction with a kid … or even a parent … as things were going on, and someone was acting out, being silly, being goofy, running down the hallway, pushing somebody, anything like that. Usually 90% [or] 95% of the time it was okay. The kid [or] person would say, “okay, yeah” [and] we talk it out. And occasionally, someone would get defensive, and you [would] … have to work at de-escalating the situation. But then by, by the time 2004 or ‘05, it literally shifted. … Looking back on it, … [when] I went up to a kid or an adult, I had to be very careful and had to use as a default. … If you look at the last 9-10 years, … it's even more so. … A lot of this for me has to do with social media. People stay in their own little influence bubbles, and they focus on all the things that upset them, and they're already like, wound up. … You could say, excuse me to someone at the grocery store and they bite your head off. Now, that didn't happen to me as a young person. … It's odd because … 2005 is when Facebook launched. I think Twitter came out like 2007 … but by then the Internet was huge. … By 2005 the internet was 10 years old, and people were already feeding into their own stuff and really just focusing on only their personal concerns. And unfortunately, even then, when there's only blogs to interact with, there was tremendous amount of [negativity] on blogs. People will say hateful things to people. … I gotta be real careful [with] anybody I'm talking to. I can't just go up [and] say, "Hey, John, don't do that." If I do that, John is probably gonna come at me and be really mad.

AA How do you think that heightened stress, like specifically impacted the way that the students or the people that you saw worked with the library? Did it impact their loan habits? Did it impact what they picked up off the shelf? Did it impact whether or not they came inside?

TB Yeah, it's interesting, because within the library … [and] media center space, I would say, only to a small degree. [For] the people and kids that came in, it … was a safe place. … So when somebody came into the media center, where they were using computers, hanging out on the couch, … [using the] cyber cafe, … [and]banquette tables, it was really comfortable. They knew that everybody there respected each other, and if you were rude to someone else … it was going to be addressed. So they would come in and use the media center freely.

But I would say the people were the sparks a lot of the time. I was on lunch duty every day for my career [and everywhere] people look, it's crowded. They're eating on the floor. People are running around. Those outside the media center interactions for me were much more of the spark. Of the students and staff that came in, I tended to know, most literally all, certainly by sight and almost everyone by name. It's harder for us because we don't have a roster, right? But I knew virtually 95-90% of the kids that came in by name, as well as staff. But when they came

in, no, it didn't really affect him. … If I had to say, "Okay, Avery, you know, you can't bring your coffee in here." You might be annoyed because you're trying to finish your paper, but you say, “okay, yeah, just hold it in the office.” … You might be a little annoyed, but you're not going to stop coming to the media center, or if you're on the couch … kids … start to make out with their girlfriend, right there. [You say,] "Whoa there, you can't do that.” They might be annoyed with me at the moment, but then they come back the next day.

… But I would say, all the people that came into the media center and when they were engaged with something worthwhile it was never a big issue. We could bump into each other, knock heads, or have something go on … but it doesn't kill the relationship with the use of the space or anything like that. …

AA Do you think some of that could be because of your like ability or persistence in creating those relationships and making sure that you had a community?

TB It definitely was a conscious effort and work. That needs to be cultivated, right? Everybody you know, you have to sort of reach out, connect with them, just make eye contact and get to know their name. We had a sign in system which can be irritating to a lot of students, but that's helped me learn their names too. … They needed to know that you cared and that you wanted to know them. … That's like the magic key to everything, right? It's interesting. I worked at a homeless shelter for about three years. I went there like every Thursday night, and the first thing they tell you when you go there is … you can get really overwhelmed with it. They say the most important thing in working with the homeless is to look them in the eye, because people walk into a homeless shelter and they can't even look people in the eye. … And it's amazing, and it's magical, and that is the key. You say hello, you nod your head but if you avoid that eye contact, and you don't make that connection, or … you're just anxious, and you don't make that connection, that person automatically thinks you don't like them, or you're looking down on them which is the biggest problem of homeless people. They feel invisible. But that same idea is true in this environment that we work in. In a media center or a public library where people are coming in. So that connection, as simple as … eye contact, head nod, wave, [or a] small half smile on your face. It's everything. It takes work.

AA … I don't remember the name of the place [with] the boys. What was it called again?

TB It's called Charles Hickey. It's the detention center for teenagers in the state of Maryland, and Hickey gets all of the most serious offenders. It's violent crimes, murders, assaults, that kind of thing. So it's a very, very intense population.

AA I've always been really curious how you sort of translate these methods that you've sort of talked about into that space, because obviously, being incarcerated is a pretty high stress situation. So I was wondering how you brought your practices into that more sort of touchy, difficult space.

TB It's funny, there's a real fine line as a human being. Whether you're going to a cocktail party or you go to study with your friends or you walk into a jail or a detention center. You have to be friendly, but you can't try too hard. So you have to just be yourself, and for me, one of the biggest things is humor, just joking around, finding something in common, finding things that someone else cares about, that you care about. So in that environment, especially in Hickey, [things] are very, very intense. Not everyone, but maybe 80% of the kids are from Baltimore City.

You hear them talking to the counselors and the psychologists, it would make you weep the lives that these kids had. But again, with their friends, they are … this and that [and have] this really, really hard shell. So you can't just walk up and go, "Hi, my name is Mr. Brennan. What's your name? Do you like the New York Giants?" You got to wait. You got to just smile and interact with them and begin to just connect. It's hard to quantify, but you have to try. But if you try too hard, you're gonna push people away. … For me, it was always humor, and a lot of times it might be, you know, music or sports, and certainly for books.

… The kids at Hickey read their asses off. They read more than almost any population I ever had, especially since it was boys. In Northwood, for example, about 80% to 85% of the checkouts and interactions for books were girls, women. Hardly any boys would but in Hickey, there wasn't a whole lot to do. So those boys read their butts off. They loved to read. [They'd] read a good book because there wasn't anything else there [to do]. They [would] read an entire series. They go through things.

So over time, you start figuring out what kind of things that they like, and you're talking about things, and then they run out of stuff. So okay, well, you like that? Maybe you'll like this. … You have to kind of put yourself out there and take risks. I might look like an idiot. I might feel silly. One time I showed them a picture of my dog thinking this would loosen them up, because all the boys talk about dogs. We have a big pit bull; it's like 90 pounds, but my wife likes to take pictures of them on Instagram [with] bow ties and hats. I put it up there on the screen … [and] we do a little interaction lesson thing. When I pop it up there, these boys who are not friendly are joking. we talk and laugh and [there's] interacting. [I] put this picture up, and the whole room goes quiet. … So I looked at this one kid and I said, "What's going on?" He goes, "Mr. Brennan, your dog's gay."

So to them, they thought that dressing up the dog was terrible. I'm thinking they'd be happy to see my dog. So, you know, I look like an idiot. … I know that's offensive [but] that's the way people talk in that environment. I was like, "Oh, alright, I get it. I get it." But I was trying to build rapport with my handsome little dog with glasses and a hat and a bow tie on, and they thought that was completely uncool, right? But you learn. … That wasn't my first try. At this point, we're talking and engaging about other things. But if that was my first go, I was trying to build rapport with these guys and show them a picture of my dog in what I thought was a funny outfit. They would have thought, "This guy's a complete idiot. He doesn't know us at all." But [since this wasn't my first try] they were able to laugh it off. "Yeah, you show us pictures. We don't want to see the hats. You show me pictures of the dog."

AA … You mentioned that they liked reading, like a lot, because that's something that they had access to. And I'm really curious, since one of the things that we are also focusing on in this paper is genre choice, and how that is related to stress and mood. And I was wondering if you noticed that there was any specific genre or author or theme that these boys really liked.

TB It's funny, because I can say, off the top of my head, I bought a whole second set of them. Are you familiar with the Blueford Series? ... It's just these simple, short novels, all urban fiction. They loved anything to do with a lot of music, a lot of biographies. Boys love nonfiction, so biographies of musicians and sports figures and stuff like that. But without a doubt, urban fiction was the number one thing that my boys loved. And they [loved] … this Blueford series.

When I left there [in] 2022, there was, 28 or 30 of these books in the series. And they would read the entire series, and then they get on a manga thing. From a friend that is, they'd be like, “Okay, I've read everything else.” So manga was great. … That's a very deep and wide genre. So we didn't have everything, but if somebody got hooked into one of those series, and that series had 40 books, they read all 40 of that, [and] just power through them. So those are, overall, the things that come to mind first and anything that they can relate to. You hear this over and over again in your early [in your career] working in librarianship: people want to see themselves in their reading. It's the most basic thing in the world. So, they want to relate to [what’s going on with] the characters … or the situations primarily. And then they'll branch out from there.

AA … Might as well read a series of giant, massive series.

TB It's amazing. And I'm talking about a wide, wide bunch of not just like 10% of these kids, [but] 60, 70% of these kids. …

AA You can apply this to … anywhere that you've worked … How did you implement some of that outreach? Obviously, you weren't a reader's advisory librarian, but it sounds like a lot of your job did have to do with getting kids in touch with stuff that they would like to read. Do you have anything specifically?

TB … There is nothing simple about it. It's just kind of [a] simple, brute effort kind of thing. But I did do some [research]. I got books on audio tape. I had [even] taken a course as a younger person in speed reading … [but] something you have to practice. So it's going to sound a little crazy, but I literally got into the pattern. I joined the Black Eyed Susan Book Award in Maryland. The Sequoia award was one of the most famous ones in California [and] I got on that committee. So we would read 8 to 10 to 12 books every month, and then discuss them. … Over the course of the year [as] the best new books that came out, we would discuss them every month, and we come up with a list of 10 and various categories.

So I was reading 150-200 books a year .. [and] had a massive database, So, …I did this terrible thing that librarians never did 30 years ago. … I would buy 10 copies of a book if I knew it was good. … So like the Black Eyed Susan is all these books, I would have 10 copies of each book.

So then I could then book talk to you. If you say, "Oh yeah, I love the Blueford series," I could go off the top of my head, "I've read 10 of them. Here's the first 10. This is why I love these first three." And go on and on about this book. I'm excited. … It's a transfer of enthusiasm. I said, "Yeah, this is great." And a kid knows I love the book. And that I actually read the damn book. I'm not just bulls---, and I'm saying you should read this, because it's really good. It's like, yeah, I read this [and] this was great. And over time, … it happened probably once a semester. I'm walking around the library with kids ... and doing a spontaneous book talk. And kids would stop saying, and almost laugh, "But Mr. Brennan, have you read every book in here?" And I'll be like, "No, well, I probably read 500 of them." But I know the ones that are good. I would have 10 of them. I would have the English teachers come in, and I would have piles of books to talk about. And so I knew [which] books were good. … Then over time, I [knew] what was really a hit with my kids. And then … I got to know the population better and what their wheelhouse was.

… I was a book talker. That was my magic. If I had any superpower, it was that I read a lot of books. I [would] make decent notes and remember them so I could spontaneously do book talks when kids came in. I would bring in entire groups of students. So, I [would] find out the teachers that wanted to work with me and I would book talk for 10 different teachers all day [about] 10 books. They would be fighting over the books sometimes. Now, if I book talk 10 books, six or eight of them, I was cleaned out. I mean, they read. People fought to get the books. Not every [book talk] works [though]. You're always going to miss something but overall, it was magic, [and] it was brute force. Reading a lot of books, finding the ones you like, knowing what the students like over time, and then just feeding into that. … I realized early on, when I was in my first couple of years, I could do a great book talk and get you really excited about reading. [With] The Fault In Our Stars, I only got one copy. So, I got 20 kids excited about getting a book, and only one kid [was] gonna get it.

So, I had to kind of fight early on a few places where it was, "Why do you want to buy 10 books?" … People would get upset, but over time they saw it and how powerful it was. And I said, "Yeah, come over here. Look. These shelves are empty. I have 10 copies of those books. Look at the gap. Look at this. [It} is where they all [live]." So it was a time and energy thing. … You [must] be willing to put yourself out there. … [We're] talking about 30 kids walking in stone cold. But the enthusiasm would come through people and the thing is, if you remember nothing else about this interview … know [that] everybody loves a good story. Everybody. They don't want to read crap. They don't want to waste their time watching a bad movie. If it's really good, and you believe that it is, they will read it on faith and probably like it, but they want to find the good stuff. And if you seem to be the one who could show them that they're cool with it. … They knew that I wasn't spouting bulls---. And I was like, "Yeah, I read this. This is good. You know, you should check it out."

AA … Is there anything else that you want me to know or that you think should be included, or advice that you have for upcoming graduating librarians who are about to enter this crazy world of librarianship?

TB … Be open. be kind. Try to find ways to make people laugh and relax. … One of the best things for stress is laughter. … I can say and do some outrageously crazy things and bizarre things, but I make people laugh. And that was also the biggest thing with the guys at Hickey. You could crack a good joke because it's funny. My kids in Hickey would always be like, “You talk about somebody, but yeah, that's my cousin, you know, that's my neighbor.”

So I would be doing something we always do [which was] a little current events thing. We're doing a little presentation about what happened that week. They can't read the newspaper, so they love this. We get a little current events and do stuff, and we do a little lesson or whatever. So, a lot of times when I was doing something, I'd be talking about … some random person in the news, I would talk about this guy and he's up on the screen, and I go, "Yeah, this guy used to live around the corner from me in New York." And they'd go, "Really?" And I go, "No." And they would all fall over ... So if you can kind of get into the mindset of your audience, your clientele. … Try to find a way to just make people laugh and smile and relax a little bit, because everything goes off of that. Whether you [are] just trying to help them out, or they're trying to print the document. One of the things in the public library, people would get so bent [about coming] in and print something. … [You] laugh a little bit [to] calm down because they're already stressed out of their mind trying to print something and run out of there. But if you make them laugh, you could keep those things from blowing up and people having a bad experience.

Interview Subject 1 with Rebecca Reeves 2/20/25

Interview conducted via email

Rebecca Reeves Can you describe the work that you do/have done in libraries?

Interview Subject 1 I have worked all positions at our library, so I have assisted patrons in various ways, cataloged new materials, prepped for programs, planned programs, created displays, community outreach activities at schools, managed the library's budget, supervised staff, updated policies, ordered materials, applied for grants, weeded the collection, oversee the library's technology plan and performed occasional IT repairs, among other general library duties.

RR Have you noticed stress affecting how people read/interact with the library? How so?

IS1 If being busier can be related to stress, then I would say I have seen maybe a slight drop in physical book usage and a large rise in eBook usage in adults. The convenience of finding a book on your phone for people constantly on the go overpowers the need to visit the library for a physical book. I also think less people browse for books than they used to. Patrons reserve books online and only come in to pick it up, or they come in with a specific book they are looking for [in mind]. We only have a few patrons who regularly ask us if we've read a good book lately, or what we can recommend, or who writes like this guy because he was good.

RR In your work with readers, what have you noticed as changing trends over time? Have you noticed certain genres come into or out of popularity? Have you noticed if that has tracked with current events?

IS1 For sure. Lately TikTok (BookTok) has influenced younger readers (and younger I would say is teens to 30s/40s)—we've seen a huge increase in interest in the romantasy and romance genres. Our older crowd still tends to stick with the mystery/thriller genres. That used to be what the majority of readers wanted, no matter the age. In our particular library, our inspirational section used to be really popular (mostly Christian fiction) but that has dropped off significantly, but I've also seen that genre doesn't produce as many materials as it did, or they're harder to find because they are self-published now rather than using the big publishing houses. And while I haven't had any book banning issues (knock on wood), I have had people call and ask if we have LGBTQ books in our library, which we do, and since those calls I have seen the drop in the Christian fiction checkouts, as if those patrons are no longer visiting the library. Could just be coincidence, though... Covid also shifted many of our readers to eBooks and those checkouts go up nearly every month, with e-audiobooks increasing as well.

RR How does mood come up when helping readers?

IS1 I think the mood of the country has somewhat changed what people go to with books. We hear sometimes people say they aren't in the mood for the heavy thrillers or the books that are

too close to what they see in the news, which used to be the "go to" books for our patrons. I feel like people used to come in often asking for books written by political people or politically related, and I don't hear that as much anymore. I kind of wonder if that's not why the romance/romantasy/fantasy genres have picked up in popularity because they are just good escapes from the bad news in the world. They usually don't have an agenda, which we see a lot in literature today.

RR How does mood affect your personal reading/library usage?

IS1 Personally, I've had a hard time finding good reads lately because I haven't felt "in the mood" for whatever I've picked up to read. It sounds good but then I can't get into it. I've heard that from other patrons, too. And I don't think it's the books. I do love to read but sometimes I also feel like I have to read for my job—people expect the librarian to read and know books, and be able to recommend books. And I think that pressure sometimes takes the joy out of reading. A few months back I went through a reading hiatus and it was actually kind of nice, but I did miss reading.

RR How have stressors in your life impacted what you're reading?

IS1 If I'm feeling stressed, I usually want a gimme book, something that is just pure entertainment and doesn't need me to focus on it too much or think about it too much. But after I've read a couple of those types, I start craving something with a little more substance and I'll switch gears. But even then I can find it hard to focus and it takes me longer to finish a book. And then I start feeling stressed that my book will be due soon and I need to finish it!

RR What has changed about books or readers' advisory since you started?

IS1 As a small, rural library, we are lucky to have unique relationships with our patrons. We know them, in and out of the library, and it is easy for us to remember what they like to read, so recommending books isn't too difficult. In fact, for several of our "regulars," as soon as we get books in [that] we know they'll like, we'll put them on reserve for them. I remember when I first started at the library 10 years ago, it seemed common to be asked for a book recommendation. It was a struggle for me because around here, not many people (or not the ones who asked) like to read what I read, so I had to learn about different genres and really pay attention to patron's comments when they returned books so I could pass on the info to someone else. But now, I don't feel like we get asked for recommendations as much. They seem to know what they want, come in and get it, and go.

RR What do you see as the future of RA and libraries?

IS1 If BookTok and Bookstagram continue their influence, I think people will look there for their recommendations first. And it's hard for libraries—small ones, at least—to stay on top of those "trends" so I think we may struggle to keep up. We had a semi-permanent display once of BookTok books and we could hardly keep up with what was out there. We got to where we

would just look at a book and say, that looks like a BookTok book, and put it out on the display. We were also hit hard when authors like Colleen Hoover and Freida McFadden and Lucy Score became sensations because before, those were relatively unknown authors, maybe even self-published, so we didn't have their books in our collection. But suddenly, they shot to popularity and everyone wanted to read every book they'd written, so we had to rush to purchase their books. Many patrons weren't patient enough to wait and ended up purchasing their own copies. My email gets filled everyday with various newsletters from publishers, distributors and vendors with book reviews and recommendations. I would generally just breeze through them but now I feel like I will need to pay more attention [to] them to keep up with what's trending. And with all the other hats I wear, that's hard to do… which only adds to my stress!

RR How have stressful/traumatic events impacted the types of programming and events that you choose to bring to your library community?

IS1 I can't say that they have. We have done a couple of events on historical events (9/11, the Holocaust) to bring recognition to them, but we have never done any programming as a type of support for stress or trauma.

RR How have these stressful/traumatic events impacted the types of materials that you have recommended/supplied to your library community?

IS1 Again, for specific events, I can't say that we have supplied anything to our community, but we do have informational resources/flyers/brochures available to our patrons for abuse, financial assistance, healthy living, etc., as well as materials in our collection on these types of subjects. After Hurricane Harvey, we did have some information from FEMA for patrons if they needed it, and our Facebook shared local resources to help people. We also had COVID information posted during that time period, too.

RR Is there anything else that you want to tell me or that you think I should know?

IS1 Even though there has been a large shift from books to eBooks, our library is still heavily used. I have heard comments many times from people not realizing the library was such a busy place. So I don't see libraries going away any time soon, even if their focuses have to shift a little away from being just physical books, or just books in general. I also think smaller libraries have an advantage to readers' advisory in that we can know our people and we can easily recommend something for them, but as reading picks up in popularity again and the younger crowds are coming back, we will have to work harder to keep on top of trends and social media, which is what they come in wanting. While social media is great for getting people reading again, it can make things harder for us to always be in the know. Hopefully our patrons can be patient with us!

Becky Spratford with Avery Alexander (02/24/25)

Avery Alexander … Can you say what name you would like to appear and also just describe your job? …

Becky Spratford My name is Becky spradford. … Currently, I work for myself. I can make my own title; so, I call myself a Readers' Advisory Specialist, because that's really what I am. But I'm also a library trustee. I'm also on the board of the Illinois Library Association. … I'm also a writer. I'm a freelance [writer]. I'm an active member of the Horror Writers Association. That means I'm a professional level member, because I've written books about horror and I'm a freelance writer, because I write for lots of people [who] pay me to write for them about books. [I also] do book reviewing. But I think that all really falls under a Readers' Advisory Specialist, because everything I do is about for ages, teen to adult, in terms of readers, matching books with readers through the local public library. So, I'm training people [on] how to do that better. So, my job is to train library workers and help them be better at … the leisure reading part of their job [and] the readers' advisory.

AA Can you describe some of the history that you've had working in libraries?

BS It all started way back when I was a library student. I worked at a law library, so I [worked with] interlibrary loan. So I actually think interlibrary loan is one of the best ways to learn how libraries work when you're starting out. That or circulation. So, my beginnings were [with] interlibrary loan in a special library, but then as soon as I had enough credits in my own library degree, I got a job at the Berlin Public Library in Illinois. … I got a job creating the readers' advisory department, and that was in the summer of 2000. So, I worked there for 15 years at the readers' advisory desk. I was the co-head of the department; and, then when I had my kids, I went down to just being a librarian - like a supervisor. … So that was there from 2000 to 2015. It was like literally a week shy of exactly 15 years.

I also started in 2004 teaching the readers' advisory course with Joyce Erics at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois, which is like, right next to Chicago. All these towns are touching Chicago. Literally touching. And we taught that class … three [times] a year. So, we always did one together and one each separately. We were adjunct faculty. … So, we taught that course. So, I was able to teach the readers' advisory course and train sort of a new level of library worker [and] librarians. And I did that for eight years. So, til 2012 … and I worked at the desk. So, I ran a readers' advisory department … [and] I taught it.

… It's been a long journey. So, in 2015, I stopped working at the library because of many reasons. But the main one was in [the] fall of 2014 I had decided …to focus more on my training career, and it got to the point where I was working like 80 hour weeks. I didn't become a librarian to do that. My husband's a doctor and we had young children, so it just didn't [work]. … So, I did leave the library, which made me sad; but, there were other things going on that didn't make me so sad at the library. I was still a trustee, and in fact, I've been a library trustee at my local library

since 2001. I will be done on May 20 of this year … so it's [been] 24 years. It'll be a few weeks shy of my 50th birthday. So it's literally [been] half my life.

I've only lived in the Chicago area since 1990. I've only lived in this town, LaGrange, which is next to Chicago, since 1998. So, it's been a long time. … I've been attached to libraries because of that. So, really, starting this summer will be the first time … I'm not affiliated officially with any library in the state. … When I serve on all these boards, I'm serving as a trustee. … A lot of them require trustees because of the tax dollars and things.

AA … How have you sort of noticed, like stress and mood and how that impacts the way people interact with the library, what they read, [and] what genres they pick up?

BS So, I'm going to talk about the way …they access the library. Is that part of it you want to talk [about] because I was not only on a library board during the pandemic, [but] I was also on the board for the regional system, right? So there was a lot that was going on, but specifically the library that I was on the board for.

…I was really glad I was there to help … walk everyone through with my experience in libraries, [regarding] the stress of the workers as well as the community. [It] was a lot, obviously, but one thing I think that [the] stress of the pandemic did, and I see this across the board with the training I do, and it's going to lead into what people read. People went back to leisure reading in ways they hadn't previously. And we see that in statistics, but I also see it in how many more people want me to train them to do readers' advisory. And I see it in the statistics because I'm on the board. So, I see the statistics both for the entire northern half of Illinois, for my library, and across the board. And I [have] talked to … people all over. … The stress was huge. But then they found leisure reading to fill a gap of … time [that] they had … . They went to eBooks in numbers we hadn't seen. In fact, … during the earlier years of … late 2020 and into 2021, we were one of the top 10 circulating libraries because … we were doing curbside. … We had eBooks. We had very generous lending … [and] our books were open to everyone.

But we've reaped the benefits of that - in that our community found our eBooks, and they keep going up. They haven't stopped going up, which I know is strange for some libraries. So, we have found that, in general, stress brought people to reading in higher numbers. … Some of it was that they had more free time, but they kept the habit. They didn't stop reading. Which I love!

Okay, number two, … horror is my bread and butter. … I have watched the horror genre, which was already starting to have a little bit of a renaissance before the pandemic, explode since. I do trainings on all the genres, and I do genre trends as well. So, two of the biggest trends that haven't gone away since the stress of 2020, and are continuing … because the world is very stressful [are] cozy books and horror books. Not just cozy. I'm seeing historical as well. So, people will go, even if they're not cozy, they will go to read something that they know has ended. So, like you know what's gonna happen when it's a historical book. You don't know what's gonna happen in the book, but you know how that time period's gonna end. So, that's important.

… Cozy, fantasy, double escape. I mean, I love TJ Klune. I'm so happy for him, like he's everywhere.

And then horror is the opposite. So, people either want and, … usually when I give my talks, I use the Hallmark Channel as an example. Like, it's exploded. My husband is a doctor. He is a family doctor. He went to work every day during the pandemic. He was hospitalized with COVID … [and] he found the Hallmark Channel [and that was] … his release of 'I need to watch something that I can just know will end happily; that I won't have to worry about it.' … But horror [is] exploding because … when times are terrible, and there [are] statistics to go back to this, there's a great book by Stephen King called *Danse Macabre* [that] I've been using for years. … I've [been] using it for years to say this for all of my books. He did a social science look at the horror genre, and he did a thing. This was years ago, in the 80s, … when times [were] tough. People have turned to horror. …. In the 1970s, when things were really stressful, that's when his books started coming out. And so I've always used that as an argument.

I have an entire book coming out with Simon and Schuster called *Why I Love Horror*, with all these top horror authors. But regularly we see horror authors on the New York Times Best Seller list. Grady Hendrix debuted at number two behind Rebecca Yarros a few weeks ago. I mean, that's huge! And these stories are stressful and scary, but they're not as scary … [because] they're not real. So, the real world is really scary, but we can escape. These authors are winning major awards too. Stephen Graham Jones has won major literary awards. Gabino Iglesias for the *Devil Takes You Home*. He won the [Bram Stoker Award], but he was nominated for the Edgar Award. … These are not just niche books, and …the numbers are showing it as well.

And in fact, my editor was like, we gotta get your book out before the board. But … Trump got reelected, so horror is not going anywhere, and that's all tied to stress. So we've seen … [the] same thing [with] romance. All of these genres we're seeing that are so popular and taking over in these viral things are because of escape. …

AA A lot of the literature that we're finding about our of her paper is focusing on escapism, and that's something that people need.

BS Fiction is always escapism, but it's those things that you know that you escape. Even like psychological suspense [is] almost like freedom. McFadden and all those. Again, it's not as bad as your life. … It's interesting to see how different escapism can be. Like the books that offer that escape can be so different. [The] version of escape is different. In fact, I tell people, "that's what your job is to figure out, right? What do they want?" If people want some kind of escape, it doesn't mean you know what the escape is?

AA … I'm curious about you as a reader. … How have you noticed stress impacting the way you read?

BS Oh, yeah, definitely. I'm actually very good about one of my talks I give; I make people assess themselves as a reader, and as a result, I have assessed myself. … I have so many

books I have to read. So, there's always stress with me with reading, because it's a job. I'm being paid to read and review books. But yes, when things are stressful in the world, I actually love audiobooks. … I used to use audiobooks only when I worked out or [was] doing chores. I had specific times I would listen, and I was a little more strict about what I would do as an audiobook. … That was because they were harder to get. But now, I have been binging different cozy mystery series, just been binging them [as audiobooks]

… Normally I don't read series, but I don't want to read in print or on my screen when I'm reading for fun, because that's work. But I do love audiobooks, and … I've noticed I'm doing entire series, which is really fun for me. I do like nonfiction …but I have been doing less of it. I think because it is too realistic. So, I've been trying to get back to it, but … it's not catching as much as those really cozy mystery series are. …I'm binging entire series.The second it ends, I get the next one.

AA … How do you think librarians like assessing their own habits? Can [it] help them be better at their jobs? Do you think that it helps them?

BS Oh, no, it's required. This is my whole thing. You can't help someone understand what they like to read and why, if you haven't done the work yourself. … You have to know yourself before you can help others, which I truly believe, because people's brains, when it comes to reading, is not an algorithm you can plot. It can be all over the place for reading. Things that don't make any sense.

So I love cozy books; but, I also love horror. … They're both genres of emotion. They're about how they make you feel. So that makes sense, but doesn't make sense for everyone. Some people don't want to be scared. I always say to people, …. “if you look at what you like to read and why, you will find you have little interesting ticks, or things about the way you read.” … So, for me, I have found by doing this, that I love to read historical fiction set in times and/or places I know nothing about. Now that's hard.

You can't tell a readers’ advisor that they can't help you. … I really loved *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee, I use that book as an example. I'm like, why did I love it? I loved it because [I] knew nothing about Korean immigrants to Japan and what their life was like - and that's what the book's about. And it's a door stopper, and it's great. Another example I use, … with my classes when I teach librarians, is really an important one. For years, I didn't think I liked romance; and, I didn't understand why. … I don't mind the sex and stuff. And then when it has an interesting frame, I really enjoy it. Like a certain culinary romance, or, like certain historical time periods. But it really was annoying until I realized the reason. … [I spent] all this time assessing what I read and why [I] don't like romance. [It’s] because they are predicated almost always on a misunderstanding. I am from New Jersey originally, and we don't do misunderstandings. We're just like no, no, stop.

It's like *Pride and Prejudice*. I could have ended that book in 10 pages. Like, stop. You're being an idiot. … Have a conversation; you love each other. Move on. … But here's the thing, that is at the heart of a lot of romances. [When] I figured that out, … I was actually able to read more

romances and enjoy them. I had to just tell myself, this is coming. Don't be annoyed and get mad. Just know it's part of the story and get over it.

…I just did a recent post about using Reddit for readers' advisory. I recently saw somebody ask for romances without a misunderstanding at the center, and I was [excited]. So I think it's just so important, because I never would have thought, even for myself, that's why I didn't like a romance. Like I couldn't figure out why I didn't like them, because I will read anything normally. … I do so much work understanding what all the genres do and I have lectures about them. I can appreciate what a book is doing and why it's doing it. … But you can't talk to people without knowing what your quirks are and why?

Why do I like horror? I like horror because I like the way it makes me feel. … I love a book where … it's so good I have to leave my house and go [make] a friend read [it]. … Like, it's so cool that a book can actually do that.

AA … You brought up using Reddit … and obviously that's sort of a newer application that wasn't a thing before RA was first "created." So I'm curious about more focusing on readers' advisory. How else has that sort of changed? What other things have influenced RA and made it different than it was in the past?

BS So, I always say this in my general talk as well. When I was taught readers' advisory back at the end of the last century, … this is how it was taught. It was taught, … when you start doing your readers' advisory, you must forget about every book you've read and liked. You should never bring in the books that you read and like. It is all about that person in front of you and what they want and never recommend a book you like.

I was like, yeah, no, that's not gonna work. So, when I teach readers' advisory, I actually flip that completely. … So, I say actually, readers' advisory is about cultivating conversations and not tallying transactions. You're not waiting for people to come. You're right to [start] conversation. … You ask people questions or you ask your colleagues [and] let people overhear it; but, you don't you say "What is a book in the last year that you had the most fun reading? I'm gonna go first and I'm gonna tell you about a book that I had really fun reading. What about you?" ...

The way readers' advisory has changed is that we can't just sit around and wait for questions. Yes, questions will come; and, we have to be ready to help people. We can talk about different resources in a minute; but, we can't just wait for people. We have to create conversations. … I have a thing where I tell people, "You put a question in every book on the whole shelf, and you hope that 10% of them come back with answers, and you make a display." But you want to have conversations about books, and start with books you've enjoyed, or books you've heard about, or books you want to talk about.

So right now it's easy to talk about *Nickel Boys* because it's going to be at The *Oscars* in a week. You could say, "Did you read *Nickel Boys* when it came out? No, well, now's your chance to read it! Don't go see the movie, because there's a big twist, and you should read it in the

book.” I'm so mad I have to watch the movie because my husband and I watch every Oscar nominated Best Picture, and I'm like, but I know what [is going to happen so], this movie's not gonna be fun. So, there's that whole big conversation; but, also the way we use resources.

I prioritize resources that have conversations. So, I use Reddit [and] I use Goodreads. I want to see readers telling me about a book. Yes, I write reviews and I go out of my way to make sure that when I read alike, I give [ones] are a little outside the box. I also make sure that they're diverse. … I don't just give you the standard read alike for a book. I really think about who would like it and why. But not everyone does that, so I really think that … resources that are about having conversations anywhere where actual readers can tell you what they liked and why, is a resource I would love to use.

The other trick I have too, is … I ask readers when they're asking me for help, before I even start giving them suggestions, “Where do you go, besides the library, to find resources? To find books to read?” Because … that tells me where to go. So, if they say, … “I just heard about this book on the radio.” And we're like, “Okay, what time was it? … What show was on?” Then we had to figure it out from there. NPR was pretty good about listing online. But it was like, … where do you use it? So if you use … *People* magazine to find your books, I'm gonna go to past issues of *People* magazine, or look up other books *People* magazine has suggested. … So, I actually ask people what resources they use to find books and start there, because then I have a set group of things that I can use.

Then, my other favorite one is, and this works every time, especially for the people that … [have] read everything you have, [asking], “Who's your favorite author?” And then I either go to fantastic fiction or just Google it. [I look for] what books they're recommending [and] their favorite author; because, I found that people read a book completely outside their regular genre if their favorite author told them to read it. So those are all my own different things.

AA So you mentioned that you like to go outside of the box to recommend things that aren't as typical. … What do you think the specific benefit for that is because, obviously, there's a benefit to it. And I'm just curious about what you think.

BS When I give read-alikes, I tend to try to do an obvious one always. So I'm trying to think … here's a book. This is called the *Butcher's Daughter*. I'm reading it right now. … It's basically an easy read-alike for *Wicked* … by Gregory McGuire, because this is a retelling of Mrs. Lovett from Sweeney Todd. She's like a secondary character in Sweeney Todd, and it's her life story. So it's very easy to sell to people who like Gregory McGuire, because his books are much darker than the musical and his books are very dark. But what else am I going to have as a read-alike for this book? … It's also an epistolary novel that is horrific, but not quite horror. So, … another epistolary novel with a gothic sensibility is *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova which is older. And then spoiler alert, … Jack the Ripper ends up being her son. So they're connecting real world [aspects]. … I thought of *From Hell*, the graphic novel by Alan Moore when I was reading the [book] because it had the same gritty feeling. *From Hell* is a graphic novel, a very thick one that is, about Jack the Ripper but it's from the point of view of the people, like a doctor.

So, it's got the butchering, the life in the streets, and the poverty at the same time period. … It's another epistolary horror novel, but it's one that's a little more academic.

… [When] I try to provide read-alikes, if there's a Venn diagram … that's your book [in the middle]. But I also do that because I know my review[s]. So this will be a book list. I'm writing it after I get with you … and there will be librarians reading it, and library workers and anybody who's like, “We have readers who like Gregory McGuire. We have readers who loved the historian. We have readers who love stories about Jack the Ripper or Victorian things.” … Then when they're going to help people, that review will show up in Novelist or somewhere on my Goodreads, and I'll have a longer explanation as to why, so I can help more readers. … So I really try to make sure I'm capturing the feel of the book, not those subject headings of what happens, but I'm still giving the obvious one. I'm not going to leave the obvious one out .

AA Obviously, because I think it's the obvious one for a reason, right?

BS Right. But you won't stop. I don't stop there, because that's unfair to readers. There are readers who like all of those books, like me. I mean, I'm a reader. … I try to never lose, lose sight of the fact that I am a reader when I'm doing this work.

AA I guess sort of going forward, you sort of talked about your present with RA [and] your past with RA. Going forward into sort of the future of the world; how do you see RA sort of positioning itself in the future?

BS It's interesting, because when everything shut down for the pandemic, everyone was running to me for training because they realized that they had neglected their services to their readers, and that was the thing everyone wanted. And so I helped a bunch of libraries either revamp or start from scratch their reader services departments; which is great because not everywhere is like Seattle, where they've had it for a long time.

So Des Moines Public Library is the example I use. … They had an award winning service set up within six months. So it was great. It's a large readership, though, like Des Moines is not a small area. So, what I see now is because things like … Tik Tok got ahead of us. Us, meaning all of us. There were a lot of people that … [got] upset. [They were like,] “I can't believe these old books are popular. I've been talking for years about the back list.” Yes, the new books are great, but most people have not read the back list. And the back list is what we have the most of, and that's what Tiktok is highlighting. They're showing us how readers can get enchanted in a book at any time, and even if it's not that book, that enchantment, that love that book, that can make you want to read more books. That is the feeling we haven't had at the vast majority of public libraries.

You know, we put up some displays. Don't get me started about libraries who are obsessed with making the displays pretty. All you need for displays [are] books. … You don't even have to have a topic for goodness sake. People just want to see books, and they'll go look at them. We have lost that connection with the readers and the joy of reading a book. The understanding that

they're reading three or four books a year, the average person, which is up since before the pandemic. We've lost [how to make] it fun for them to find books. So I think that we have to recapture some of that joy.

[We] do not have to make TikTok videos, but I talk a lot about being interactive. So like I said, using questions [and] asking your patrons what books they want to see on display. … Ask people, “What's the book you recommend to everyone you know?” Put that up at all the service points, put it online, put it in every book on the whole shelf. Get the answers back and make a display and call it ‘our readers suggest’. And then you're showing them that you're having a conversation with them. So, you're saying to them: I listened to you. Look, here are the books you suggested. Now let's get them out to other people.

When you make readers’ advisory more of the interactive experience, that's what people are looking for. They're looking for a way to share the love of the books they're reading. They want to know that people are listening to them. We just lost so much track of that. We got so worried about holds, lists and standing order authors and all the little things we have to do. We've lost the joy. So, when I give training, I try to help people capture the joy again and find ways to help. Also, I want to say that, I call my company RA for a reason. Everyone on staff can help with readers’ advisory. Everyone. There [are] ways you can get people [to] contribute to staff recommendations. …

Nanette … started a readers’ advisory work group at her library, Champaign Public Library [in] the town that University of Illinois is in. It's a decent sized town; and, it's an academic town. … Anyone on staff at her huge library is allowed to be part of the group that provides readers’ advisory. … They have a Teams channel, and that's great! That's something I'm seeing more and more, that recapturing the joy of everyone at the library and [letting] everybody help provide service to readers because chances are, all your employees are readers. So those are some changes I'm seeing.

AA I guess so to end out, you've answered all my questions very well and very beautifully. So I guess is there anything else that you think is important to know that I didn't touch on, that you just want people to think about going forward or to new librarians, anything that you feel like is important to sort of say.

BS … I think mood in general is important, because we don't read books in a vacuum. We're not the same person every day. … And there are books that I start, and then I'm like, I just can't do this right now. Then a few months later, it's like, I need it, [the book], in my life, and it might not be something I can tangibly point to. Why? Sometimes it's obvious; but, sometimes it's not. And why does that happen? Why are certain books? Because who you are as a person is not the same every single day. Who you are at your core is but how you're interacting with the world changes. And what you need [changes]. You need a short book, a long book, a happy book, a sad book. We've always said, “What are you like? Tell me a book you've enjoyed reading recently.” But we lost track of that. “Do you want that or something different?” We've lost track of that, and we forgot. Maybe because we're so busy doing it every day. … We forget that it's a

conversation and that people might want to try new things. Might want something different than they usually read, because … [sometimes] you do. So I think the idea of thinking about readers' advisory as attached to the way you're feeling is really important. And I think … we see it with the trends, but we forget to prioritize it.

Melissa Homayouni with Avery Alexander (02/24/25)

Avery Alexander Can you tell me … how you would like your name to appear when we publish it, and also just give me your general job title as you'd like it to appear?

Melissa Homayouni Okay. So just first and last is fine, Melissa Homayouni and then just Library Media Specialist.

AA Great, okay. And then, can you just describe your career? We've been asking everyone to sort of describe their careers in libraries and their trajectories and everything. So is there anything you want to share about that?

MH Okay, so, I actually started out as a classroom teacher, and I worked in that capacity for 15 years in MCPS [Montgomery County Public Schools]. I wanted a change, and I love literacy and I love technology. So, in speaking with the media specialist at [the] school that I was looking at, I realized that would be the best of both worlds. So, I went to an online school in Montana and got a graduate certificate, because I already had a master's degree in library science, and I loved it! I just loved every class. Then, I did an internship with her, and [I've] been working in elementary school media centers since 2016. …

AA So you work with kids. … We were really interested in talking with someone who works primarily with kids. … We've been getting a lot of insight into adults, and so I'm really interested in knowing what you've seen with children, especially in a school setting.

MH … So, I work with children, ages three to approximately 11 years old. I think the biggest thing I see about the media center is it has a very calming effect on children. It's a place that children choose to go. They are required to come for lessons [so],I see all students in the building. I see them once every other week; but, during certain times of day, their teachers allow them to come, and they choose to come. We have students that also come. I think actually, it would be in … their behavior plan, to come to the media center for a break when they're feeling like they need a little distance from their classroom. So, it's also a place where kids can just make a good … choice about what they're going to read.

That's the other thing; nowadays, kids are required to read so many things. So, one thing that I'm really adamant about, and it's one of my standards, is to nurture that love of reading, because ... when I'm reading, I'm not focusing on my problems. I'm focused on the book and the stories. I really get into it. So, there's a lot of opportunities for me to make connections with kids, and not [be] judgmental with them. It's really a peaceful place. I'm happy to say that some of our most troubled students actually do well when they come to the media center, both for class and for our personal choice.

AA What are some ways that you adjust or design the library to make it this very calming place, because that sort of thing doesn't happen just on its own right. That's the effort that people put

in. So what kind of efforts do you put in to make sure that this is a space where they can feel safe and calm?

MH So, the biggest thing is my assistant and I both try to make personal connections with the students [by] finding out what's going on in their lives. So, we're having little mini conversations with them, whether it's searching for books or checking out books or they're just in there, even to come in and get a Chromebook. [We ask,] "What's going on?" ... That little personal connection is most important. And then secondly, I provide a space that has a lot of seating that's comfortable so that they can spread out throughout the room. I try to use displays that are bright and inviting for them. I also have a maker space area in the corner with all kinds of cool things, like a LEGO wall. … I got little robots they can work with. So, makerspace is something they can do during their recess. I only allow one student per class, so sometimes kids … to come to the media center, where it's quiet and they can kind of explore and be creative. That's also very inviting for a lot of students. So it's the physical space, but it's also the relationship building with the students, and because I see them for six years, it's important to build that early on.

AA And with books specifically, what are some ways that you market the collection, … or anything that you do specifically with the books? … What are ways that you figure out what they want and what they need, depending on who the kid is and what they're dealing with?

MH You have to be pretty familiar with what's going on with kids these days. ... I like to, number one, I ask them, and a lot of kids will come up and request, "Do you have this book? Would you get it?" ... For some of these kids ... they're not getting [books] at home. We have a low socio economic area that is our population. So, also marketing the books that are in our Maryland state program [is important]. So, [there's] the Black Eyed Susan contest, and those books are selected by librarians, and for the most part, they're really, really great books. And so, in the beginning of the year, I will do the older kids. I do a book trailer. We also did a book tasting. So I had the books kind of setup like at a cafe, and they would sit and have time to read. We had music going, so kind of give a little atmosphere.

Also, I highlight authors for the younger kids. And it's funny, because I'll read a book, and then the next thing you know, everybody wants to check that book out. So, I try to take books that are, you know, not only culturally relatable to them, but also [have] different social, emotional topics. Like today, I read a book about a little boy who didn't have a leg, and how the kids reacted on the playground; and, we talked about disabilities. So, just something that really makes them think [and] we have good discussions about it. And also I like to read really fun books that are funny to get them laughing. I want it to be a good, happy place for them to come.

AA Specifically, I'm curious, and you don't have to, obviously, if you don't want to answer anything, just that's fine. I am curious about the kids. Have you noticed any specific things that cause them to be more stressed, and anything that you've noticed that sort of that you've kind of seen combined with their desire to use the library?.

MH Yeah, so we have recently had a couple of kids who, I don't know if they're homeless or if they don't share everything with us because it's confidential, but I do know from a conversation with them that they were not getting food. So, one of the students was comfortable telling me that so we actually have snacks in the media center. … I don't want any kid to go hungry, or have anything that could take away from them focus[ing] because ... we are trying to academically instruct them. So, that was something that came through.

We did have one student that has started getting very upset about ICE coming to her house. And so, you know ... I didn't connect it to any kind of a book. I just know it's a place where she was comfortable coming in and talking to us about that. I also try to bring up things that are relevant, but ... I've had a couple kids ask me about things like 9/11; and, I do have some books that are appropriate for that. ...

AA … I was just asking, because I think a lot of people assume that kids don't know what's going on in the world, or that they don't have a lot going on inside of their heads that would stress them out.

MH Oh, they do. They do. Unfortunately, they're exposed to a lot of [the world]. ... Parents are letting their kids access things including social media, so the older kids, you know. So I do lessons with them, on [digital citizenship] and lots of different tools that help them be safe and ... so they don't feel uncomfortable talking to a trusted adult. Our school's really big on having a trusted adult who you can go to with anything, and so I try to encourage that.

AA Have you noticed any specific changes? Because you mentioned that you were a teacher at one point, and now you've been doing this since 2016, and I'm wondering if you've seen any specific changes like stress levels for kids? Or also you work with teachers too.

MH ... During the pandemic that was very stressful on both fronts. ... One year, I did not work as a media specialist. I was more like a co-teacher in Zoom classrooms, because that was the need but at the same time, … once a week, I had books that kids could check out and went into each Zoom Room classroom, and demonstrated how they could check out a book online. Then I would have it in front of the school on this date ... so I had books out for kids that had checked out books online and ... tried to give them a little bit of normalcy. But, yeah, that was an extremely stressful time because there was so much uncertainty, there was a lot of fear, and so I think it took a good two years to get out of that. And so now this ... is different, because there is a lot more going on than when I first started teaching. Before ... it was more kid problems you know, tattletaling, or struggling with reading, or, you know, regular just [things] that we could handle and deal with. And now sometimes there's issues that I'm like, I don't even know how to handle that, you know? So it's definitely gotten more stressful. ... With social media and the just internet there's so much more out there that's accessible to kids. It's hard. It's really hard to help them navigate that.

AA And I've been asking, like people that we've been interviewing, so obviously, you're human too. You get stressed. And we've been kind of asking … How have you noticed your reading habits or library usage and stuff changing and the way you interact with the library?

MH Well, I use the library a lot. I have a very long commute, and so I actually listen to audiobooks, and that is my saving grace, I will tell you. I've always been a reader. ... When my kids were younger, I was reading to them, not reading so much for my pleasure. ... I like to go to the library, and I encourage it for other people as well. I had another person who was like, "I just, I want to read, but I don't have time." I said, "Do you ever think of audiobooks? Check them out through the library for free, just download it." And that is definitely for me, because I do have a lot of stress personally. ... I like to read and just dive into a book.

AA And so, obviously, you're a proponent of using the public library. Not surprised to hear that. … Do [you do] any specific outreach or work with the public library at your school?

MH Yeah, so we partner with Montgomery County Public Libraries. We used to have them come in and give the kids library cards. It was like a whole big thing. When they were in kindergarten, they got a library card, and it was really cool. But now that's not so much the case anymore. I'm not even sure of the process, but throughout the year, the children's librarian at Gaithersburg Library will reach out to me and give me different flyers and things to [give to] our students looking for [things to do] that break. [During] Winter Break, they have several activities. They'll have some things over spring break, so I'll send that information home. And then ... we have the children's librarian come in and she talks to all the students about the summer reading program and ... that will keep them reading while the school library is closed.

AA … I'm really curious to know if you've noticed specific genres coming in and out of popularity, and if there's been a link to any specific events or things because I know children's tastes change drastically over the years. I'm wondering if you've noticed any significant genre preferences or changes over time.

MH … A big difference from when I first started as a media specialist to now is the graphic novels. ...And the goofier, the better. They tend to really like those. They also like the ones that are kind of more realistic fiction. Or the ones that were a chapter book, but then were turned into a graphic novel. I guess I feel like that's more accessible to them, especially struggling readers. ... And then I've got a whole group of kids that will only read nonfiction so that's been pretty steady going forward. I do try to highlight different sections of the media center ... But for right now, the main things are the graphic novels for the older kids and their character picture books for the younger ones.

AA To just wrap up, is there anything else that I didn't touch on, that you want to tell me, or that you would like to be included? …

MH ... One thing is that ... [the media center] was like the one place you know, when [people] were younger, that they felt good to go to a librarian ... especially if they were like an English

language learner. ... That stuck with me that I don't know ... everything going on with them. So I just wanted to get a place that you know is welcoming to them because regardless of what's going on at home, they know that within the school, I would like to have a place that they feel they could go. And so that's kind of what I strive for when I'm trying to make decisions about the media center. I kind of keep that in the back [of my mind], and I know that makes sense.

Yaika Sabat with Avery Alexander (02/28/25)

Avery Alexander Can you tell us what name you want to appear [in the paper], and also just your job title as you describe it?

Yaika Sabat Yeah, so I mean, my name is fine. Yaika Sabat. My job title is Manager of Reader Services, and that is at NoveList. … Technically, it's NoveList, a division of EBSCO Information Services [NoveList (EBSCO Information Services)], like in parentheses, but yeah.

AA Yeah, and NoveList was the big reason why we were really interested in speaking with you. Can you describe what you do at NoveList, your history with books, and how you found yourself at NoveList?

YS For sure. I mean, my history with books goes back forever. My mom was very much a take the kids to the library mom, so I was in them all the time; but, working in libraries didn't happen until about five years after my undergrad. I got my undergrad in cultural anthropology with a minor in basically, like literature philosophy. And I was looking at what I wanted to do next. I knew I wanted to go to grad school, but since I wasn't sure, I decided to just work until I was sure and I decided to test out. I had moved back to Texas. There was a part time position at a local rural library. So, I decided to test out working there to see what it was like, because I knew I loved books; but, I also knew there was more to libraries than just [books]. [But], I love books. So, that sort of got me the introduction, because I was a library assistant there, which was a front desk “page,” like, basically anything that you need help with.

Then I got a full time job as a circulation clerk; and, that's sort of when I started doing more. I mean, obviously I did some RA at the other one, but because I was at that front desk all the time, [I] did a lot more RA at that job. [I] applied to grad school, and sort of started grad school at the same time I started working at the Fort Worth library in adult reference as a library assistant. So sort of just went from there.

My jobs at libraries were always public facing. So, [I] did things like the adult reference desk, working at a branch, doing classes, doing teen services, teen reference, and also programming. And then I moved to managing a circulation department. … As a manager, I did try and always have at least some time on the desk every day. So really, doing that is what helped me think [that with] each job I got better [at] understand[ing] … about books, following trends, and talking with people about books, which is always something I like to do. But it was really the experience of sort of that day in, day out, working with patrons, that made me realize how interesting I found that side of it; and, it's why [I] sort of focused on genre studies and like collection development and stuff in my grad program.

So yeah, I worked in public libraries in Texas, and then I saw posting at NoveList. It was for, I believe a Readers’ Advisory Librarian - [that’s] the title. I had used NoveLists for years at that point to do RA because it helped me sort of learn how to have RA conversations at the desk. It was like a little cheat sheet, because I could go to the books page that I hadn't read and ask

like, “Did you like this theme?” when I had no idea what the book was about originally. So, I applied immediately, and got the job. And so, I started July of 2020, so right in the heart of COVID, and then at NoveList, I've done a lot of different things.

I've done more content, editorial things where I have worked on the recommended reads list, which are now called curated lists. So, I helped update the adult list. Then I helped coordinate the creation of all the lists. That keeps you very aware of what is happening in books, because you're constantly updating these lists. And I also became responsible for all the adult genre guides, which are great because I really like genre studies, and it helps me stay aware of that. But I also started doing things like webinars or virtual trainings. We had libraries asking us, “Do you do any training?” And so we started putting together trainings, which has now become Learn With NoveList, which is the professional development platform that we have, and I am one of the instructors for that. So, I develop and teach courses on helping readers. So, I've done things like ‘understanding your reader’, which is sort of how to have those conversations and translate that into recommending books. I've done one on using story elements. I've done one on helping audio book readers. So, sort of the variety, whatever topic, is going to work. And I also help coordinate and moderate all of our crash course webinars with library reads. I also did help launch a chat product. So it's been a lot of different things, but my work has always been connected to either helping readers directly or helping library workers help readers, because even our book lists and our genre guides are aimed at making it easier for people to work with readers and recommend books.

AA I am curious because you mentioned … your work is so tightly knit with genre. … What sort of genre trends have you seen while you've been working at NoveList?

YS I mean, we witnessed the romantasy [happening] in real time. … We also witnessed the resurgence of cozy. And it was funny, because horror is my key genre. I work with the Horror Writers Association and do stuff with them. And also notice that horror is having a real renaissance, which I attribute a lot to the diversity of writers we have now. But cozy and horror sort of went up at the same time, which I think is largely due to anxieties in the pandemic. And then we've seen little mini trends with romances. There's been more sports romances. … I could give you eight different ones [trends] with horror. We've had mother horror, like maternal horror, horror of motherhood, grief. Horror is a big one. There's a resurgence of body horror. There is more fairy tale influence and retelling. So, that has been another big one that we've seen. I've also noticed in historical fiction, more time periods than World War Two, finally, and World War One, and also more diverse perspectives. So you know, for example, a story about the Vietnam War written by a Vietnamese author, as opposed to a white author. Yeah, so that's like a handful [of] ones that I've noticed.

AA … Something I've tracked … [is] that concept of escapism; and, it's interesting that all of these genres are kind of [having] one thing in common, and [that’s] … escapism, but they're also different.

YS … If you think about it, it's sort of catharsis and comfort in a different way. So, the romances, romantasy, … and even cozy mysteries, they give you a safe, hopeful escape from what's going on, which is wonderful, and it's what people want. They want to sort of soothe that anxiety. Then you have things like horror, which give you a way to release anxiety. … It's so good because it can let you process fear and anxiety in a safe environment, and it resolves so you get out of that situation. So, when the world is consistently anxious and scary, you can have these moments of surviving a scary situation and also reading out situations that are worse than yours. You know, at least there's not like vampires coming after you in real life. At least there's not a possession happening. So it's driven, I think, by that same need for comfort and escapism. … People process it in different ways, like I watched a lot more horror movies during the pandemic, which is saying a lot, because I record movies regularly, and then I would sprinkle in some like, Great British Bake Off and that kind of stuff. But yeah, there's people who have been seeking, like, comfort and I think catharsis in genres that seem very different, but ultimately give you that in one way or another.

AA And I think that's also why … making sure that librarians know how to cater towards their patrons is so important?

YS I mean, … one question I always like to ask, unless someone is very direct. Sometimes people will say, “I want this type of horror.” And you're like, okay, they're in the mood for this. But sometimes, if they say, “Oh, I like these types of books,” it's important to ask, “Okay, well, what are you in the mood for?” Because I love horror and love dark, tense things, but I might want a cozy fantasy. And if you don't ask that, you're going to go in one direction, and they might go along with it, or they might say, “Oh, actually, I want this,” and you have to start over. … I think it's really important to check in with your individual reader so that you're clear about what they need in that moment, because they're going to need different things in different moments, even if they have one genre they read. So yeah, that's a crucial one to me.

AA … How is it different when working for something like NoveList, that's more indirect, versus being in person?

YS It is definitely [different]. I mean, mainly because when you're working indirectly, you either have to do something for a broader group [and] you don't know the individual reader, or you have to sort of create … [something for specific] readers. These are for readers who are looking for this. So you either have to create that yourself, or go with something more broad, unless you're doing chat RA. Chat RA is very similar, except you don't get the body language. It can be a little more stilted than in-person RA. We don't get to necessarily talk to the readers that we're helping, and so we depend on what we are finding out about what readers are looking for [and] what we're hearing from libraries to shape what we're doing. Whereas at the front desk, I could just ask. I could get that information in real time, which is great. So, yeah, it is … a little different, for sure. …

AA … When you were working with the public, did you notice how stress and mood might have affected what they asked you for? [Or] how they interacted with you? Or what you recommended and how you interacted with them? …

YS … It can, in fact, both ways. Because if the library worker [or] the readers' advisor, is stressed and in a rush, and it's summer reading, you have eight people in line, and you're like, I need the next person, it can affect what you're doing. … You're not going to go as in depth. A lot of the time, you're going to want to speed through a process; which doesn't mean you can't give good recommendations, but they might not be as precise as they were if you're feeling that pressure to sort of rush through something.

And for readers, I definitely had, I mean, I had regulars. I had people come in every week, and sometimes they wanted help with the book, and they were very open, and they were very talkative. They would let me know exactly what they wanted. And other times, either because they were in a hurry or I didn't ask about all their details, but if they weren't having a good day, sometimes they would really give you the bare minimum, and you had to work off of that. … I mean, people who normally [are] like, oh, this person, they're working [there's time] to have a whole talk [are instead] like, nope, I got five minutes. And it was hard because … you have some people who are always like that. I had regulars who … didn't go in depth. They weren't super chatty. … It sort of took a little time for you to realize the kinds of things they liked over time, which I was able to do because they were regulars.

But otherwise, I always tell people, sometimes in the real world, you have to just work with whatever they give you. Do the best you can; because, you're going to get a different thing every day from people depending on what mood they happen to be in that day, or even if it's like a parent, if they have their kids, or if they don't have their kids, it's going to shift what they asked for. I definitely talked with … people who were thriller readers and [they would say], "Actually, I want something a little bit lighter right now. … I got too much going on; I want something funny." And so I would have people tell me, "No, I really don't want anything serious right now. … I'm so busy; I need something that's really easy, really fast for me." So I know it impacts the external circumstance. External circumstances and emotional circumstances are going to impact what your reader is looking for. …

AA Did you notice any sort of changes overall, like [with] these interactions, like since you started?

YS … It's interesting. I also … worked in different settings too. So, I started in a small rural library. Then I moved to a suburban, single branch, up and coming area [with] lots of families [and] lots of kids. Then [I] went to a big city system and then another suburban one. …

I will say, … people were just more tense in general in 2019, to 2020 … because there was so much going on. So there was a little bit of … electricity in the air. Sometimes you didn't know someone was going to be there. And also, it was Texas, so you didn't know if someone was

going to be upset that you were wearing a mask, for example, or upset that they had to wear a mask.

But as far as the types of books people wanted, it kind of lined up with the general trends you saw. So I saw a lot more things like, … literary books were in. … So, like Marie Benedict became very big, and the book clubs, [such as] Reese's Book Club, became everything. … Romance became more of a thing people were looking for. So it's like what they asked for didn't really change, but the mood people were in definitely changed, … because there was so much happening in the world. Same thing with an election. When we had an election year, everyone was just kind of on edge, like a little bit more during 2016 for example, or 2020.

AA And so just you mentioned book clubs, which I think is neat, … because … reading has become more social.

YS Yes, yeah. … Reading has become more social. … If we saw something was announced, for example, a Reese's Book Club, we're like, "All right let's get [it] … in circulation because we pulled holds [and] we're like, there's gonna be so many holds." [With] *Where the Crawdads Sing,* we had, I think, 200 holds at one point. Like, it was crazy. Anything by Reese's Book Club [or] Oprah's Book Club, those are huge because [people] are talking about it with their friends. They're talking about it with the people that they know who are reading the same books, and it connects them that way.

Or as social media became bigger and Tiktok became bigger, you would start to see those books suddenly become more asked for, even if they were a couple years old; and, you're like, are they having this resurgence? Oh, … it's become a thing on Tiktok, like you sort of see that with teens especially. And I do think social media has a part to play with that, like people are talking about books more on there. And so there's sort of this unified popularity for some titles. But yeah, book clubs and bestseller lists were always very popular. The libraries I worked at … had people … come in every week and be like, "Oh, let me see the New York Times bestseller lists and see what I haven't read on there." Like, consistently.

AA It is just so interesting because book lists obviously have always been a thing that's always been constant. … I think you bring up a great point with social media, like with BookTok. …

YS I mean, that's BookTok. That's a big reason we even got the bloom in romantasy. Because obviously, if one book becomes popular in publishing, they want other books like it. It becomes a system where it's like, oh, this is what's selling right now. We're going to make more of that so that all tracks. But, yeah, I think social media and the way that books have become more of a thing on social media does play into that.

AA It's almost like, it's cool … to read.

YS Oh yeah, it's cool to read. Yeah, … I feel like there's some people who definitely read to stay aware of what's being talked about on social media. Like, it might have people reading more, which is fine with me. Like, cool, enjoy it.

AA Not gonna look a gift horse in the mouth on that one. It gets people in the library. … And obviously you aren't just like a professional, you're also a reader, right? So if you want to talk a little bit about how you think that stress has impacted your reading and your habits and using the library, I'd be very interested to know about that, too.

YS I notice if I'm super stressed, [while] some people read more, I will read less a lot of the time. And I think it's partially because reading does involve me processing and being involved in the story and using critical thinking. … I also have ADHD. So when I'm stressed, the ADHD flares up, and focus in general becomes harder.

So there were [times], especially during COVID, I really didn't read much because I just couldn't put the focus into it. But then I figured out audiobooks worked for my brain in that moment. So, then I was back to using the library, but it was mainly just [for] audiobooks. I wasn't really checking out any print books, because I knew there wasn't really a point to print books, but I was adding to the audiobook … Libby circulation like crazy, because that's all I was reading. …

Also, when I'm stressed I'm usually not going to read nonfiction. It's got to be a fiction book. Graphic novels are something that I can sort of read consistently regardless of my mood. So, that's been because I've read comics … since I could read, basically. But yeah, I've noticed that, at least for me, … I read less when everything's really stressful and hectic. I end up drifting away from books in that moment.

AA Again, I think that goes to show how different everyone is? … No one reads the same as any other person, and no one is the same reader any given day.

YS Yeah. I've started reading more print books again, but there [was] probably three years where I only read audio books. … Too much happened. I moved [and] it was a lot of things. A lot going on. So it was just audiobooks. I think I just started reading print books regularly again, probably last year.

AA So you bring up format, which is interesting. ... Did you notice any sort of changes in preference for format, like besides mood [and] besides genre?

YS For me ... if I could read while, like cooking or baking or doing something else, it worked better for me. And for that, I was like, “oh, audio books. All right, let me give it a shot”. [That] really works for me, but I also discovered I really like podcasts, so that format kind of works for my brain. Certain books I don't want to read in that [format] because they might have … little files in between. And it's, I'm sure, great in audio, but one of the things that runs through the book are little Morse code snippets in each little file or document you get. So it's like an experience, something like that. … Audio is a big one to me.

I've also noticed eBooks and audiobooks, I believe, are being read more in the last couple years. [For] audio books, we actually just talked about this in the Keeping Up With Books Webinar, *The Guardian* called it, like the year of the audiobook 2024. Like audiobooks are becoming more popular with readers. I don't know if part of that is [because] people … like podcasts. And there's also been … a lot more celebrity readers, and so I feel like that has also become kind of popular.

For romance, there's a whole running gadget, like, "Oh, that person needs to read an audiobook." So, romance is different if you experience it in audio format, for example. So I think all of that is contributing to people testing out the different formats. A bit more eBooks, I think, have certainly gone up, which, again, I think [is] also probably [because of] social media. … If you look at booktok, there's a lot of books on there that you can maybe only get on Kindle Unlimited. So, people read more eBooks. So, I think there has been a shift, and I think part of that was also the inability to necessarily go in for books for a bit during COVID. So, using digital books was easier [to] access for a lot of people. So, I think there [are a] few things that have factored into that.

AA It's a big accessibility thing.

YS Definitely, yes.

AA Especially with audiobooks too, like you mentioned. I also have ADHD. Mine goes the opposite way. I can't do audiobooks.

YS I have to be doing something while I listen to the audiobook, or I can't.

AA It's nice to know that there's different things now, like different ways that people can enjoy reading. So I guess it kind of makes sense that people are reading more because there's more options.

YS There's more options, and it's easier to get them. Like, if you look, I think even three or four years ago, there weren't as many places to get audiobooks easily. eBooks weren't as popular. It's easy to access now. … I also am someone who gets migraines, and so I can listen to an audio book when I have a migraine, but I can't necessarily read, because reading will stress it more. It's very unique. But, yeah, I do think the fact that they've become more accessible, as far as getting them, … has factored into that.

AA … So I guess to like, wrap it up, … is there anything else that you want to touch on that we didn't get to that you think would be important for us to include or have in our paper?

YS … When you asked about mood and stress, I think one thing to remember when you're working with recommendations, especially if you're doing direct, is that it really is a conversation. It's a connection. A lot of it does actually have to do with being able to understand

and navigate different personalities as well. And I think that's really something important to consider, because even if someone's in a great mood, they might naturally be just a totally different energy in a conversation. And so I think something that's very important to consider in RA is interpersonal connection and emotional intelligence because you have to be able to still connect with that person … and [be] comfortable helping that person, when you might get like, eight different personalities in one day in the library. … A really important element [is] trying to understand people as part of doing RA because that is what it's all about. [It's about] understanding what each individual is looking for.

AA It's almost like customer service, kind of, in a way.

YS It's very customer service. Working in libraries is a lot of customer service, unless you're in the back, maybe, but if you have any public face, well, it is a customer service job. It might be a different type, but that's what you're doing. You're serving your patrons and you're helping them, but it's customer service, and I think it's really important. And you know, being able to at least, even if you don't like different personalities, being able to at least navigate and understand that, I think, is pretty crucial.

Interview Subject 2 with Rebecca Reeves 2/28/25

Rebecca Reeves So, for starters … [w]hat is your … job title?

Interview Subject 2 So my … job title is senior publicity manager.

RR … And what [do you do] in that role?

IS2 Yeah, so in that role, I create and spearhead publicity campaigns for our authors at Riverhead, an imprint of Penguin Random House. That basically entails creating ways to get our books media in terms of coverage in newspapers, websites, podcasts, [and] a bunch of various different outlets. It also entails working with our authors on media training, developing assets for the novels or, you know, books generally that they've worked on in terms of press releases and a bunch of different creative assets. Arranging book tours for them. A lot of various things that fall under and fall under those faces.

RR That sounds really cool and interesting. I love that. And so, … you might not be able to answer it, it's just a question we're kind of throwing out there. Have you noticed stress affecting anything that you're doing or what people are reading or what's being written?

IS2 Yeah, I absolutely think so. So my mind goes to stress on a kind of national level in terms of what's happening politically [and] what's happening environmentally. And so I would say that we have both writers and readers responding to that. … I've noticed writers and readers responding to that kind of stress.

In many different ways for writers, it's them responding both in the nonfiction space and in the fiction space in terms of what they're writing. … My brain first goes to non-fiction in terms of big political pieces, whether it's against Trump and his policies or … big pieces on environmental issues. And in terms of fiction, it would be … the genres. … I would say there's been a big, big push for romantasy. Like, romantasy is kind of everywhere right now. And I think in a lot of ways, that's a response to people wanting to escape what's happening. Like the stresses of what's happening in our country, and then wanting to escape that.

So I think writers feel that way [too] and so they've been writing into that space and I think readers probably feel that way too. And so they're reading in the space of wanting to escape their stresses and then reading those books. …

RR … Have you noticed other genres coming in and out of popularity recently? …

IS2 Yes. … This is not as relevant any more, but I noticed a couple years ago … there was another very big subcategory of romance novels. … It was like "tennis romance" or like "golf romance." …

RR Yeah, like the sporty romance

IS2 Yes, yes, that was really big and I do think that was still a symptom of escapism in a lot of ways because that was … around the time that people were still really grappling with the pandemic and kind of and trying to come back from that in a lot of different ways. So … that's a small one.

But speaking of the pandemic, it actually reminded me of a probably one that's even more relevant, which is dystopian fiction. That got really, really big immediately post-pandemic. That again, I think was a big response to people feeling very stressed with everything [during] the pandemic and wanting to escape that. And not just escape … [but] process it … and then think about it head on.

RR I've definitely heard about the dystopian stuff from librarians … And so outside of the professional world, how does mood or stress affect your own personal reading?

IS2 Oh man, you caught me in a week where I was so stressed at work in a very good way, because it's all very good things … Honestly, I don't read a lot of genres, I don't read romantasy. I don't really read a lot of rom coms. But with that said, when I am feeling stressed, I do tend to … skew a bit more genre.

So I like, in terms of just needing to read something that's easy and light and fun, … I read Taylor Jenkins … [such as] her most recent book *Carrie Soto Is Back*, and that was just really nice. So I do feel that when I'm stressed, I look for books that are a bit poppier, a bit lighter, a bit easier, but still pack some kind of emotional punch that will make me feel like the time I invested in it was still worthwhile.

RR Oh, I love that. Honestly, I feel that though, because when you're stressed, why do you want to dig into something that's so deep and dense? … And so back to the professional again … since you started your career, how has publishing in general changed?

IS2 … That is such a big question. How has it changed? It's changed … Okay. I'll start with the first thing that pops into my mind, which is very specific to my field. So I don't know, I don't know how helpful this will be for you. But for me, publishing has changed because the media has changed.

Like magazines. We have, like, three magazines left. … Everything's shifted to online. So … [for] publicity ten years ago … usually a third of the media we would garner was print publications and now that's dwindled massively. … With that said, I think there's … been a lot more space for marketing in terms of social media in terms of brand … advertising because … so many more people are online than they were … however many years ago.

So I guess in terms of how people find out and learn about books and how books are marketed and publicized has changed a lot. So I've been in the industry for maybe about 10 years now. So I would say that's changed a lot. And it was changing even before, but it's only been even more exacerbated since. …

RR … Where do you think the future of this is going to go?

IS2 … I don't know if this is answering what you're asking, but we … definitely do push certain books more depending on how they are in conversation with what's happening nationally. … Which hopefully ties to what you're saying because what's happening nationally has a lot of stress triggers, right?

So for example, there's one book that we published this past fall that's entirely about our global race for critical metals. … And everything that Trump's trying to do with Ukraine, and for rare Earth resources, that's very much timely and so we're kind of pushing that book more now. And of course, … a lot of people are really stressed about what's happening on a presidential level.

… In a way we are … absolutely responding to what's happening right now. And I would say that's not just on a publicity or marketing level, but even when our editors are looking for which books to acquire in the future. I'm confident that they're also looking at what the conversation is right now and what the conversation might be a couple of years from now. So they can be acquiring books and hiring voices that are … currently or will be responding to that too.

RR … Is there anything else you want to tell me or that you think I should know?

IS2 … When I was in college, I worked in a library. … I still think about it very fondly. It was really great. If this is at all useful, I'll just say a few lines about this.

So I strongly feel that libraries are a very important, sacred … third place … in terms of them being pillars for the community and then being places for people to go to when they're stressed or looking for an answer because of any stress. Libraries have tons of resources for people who want to escape, whether it's, you know, romantasy or dystopian fiction, or if they're looking to see their experiences, due to the pandemic or other things, mirrored back to them. Or if they want to read nonfiction to kind of understand what's happening in the world right now.

I think that libraries … are very important spaces in terms of a stress relief valve.

Molly Templeton with Rebecca Reeves 3/4/25

Rebecca Reeves So, obviously I know your name, but just for the record, what is your name and job title?

Molly Templeton My name is Molly Templeton and my job title is … I don't really have one. I am a freelance writer and I work for the Ursula K. Le Guin Foundation but I don't have a job title there.

RR You are all good. I forgot to introduce myself. Hi, I'm Rebecca. And so I know you say you don't have a job title but what is that you do? Like, how would you describe your work?

MT … Well I have three jobs. I write news posts for *Reactor* formerly known as Tor.com for four hours in the morning … . Those are like [for example], an Avengers movie is coming, here's who's going to be in it. That kind of post.

Then, I work for the Le Guinn foundation where I help run the … the social media. We're working on a new podcast. It's just all kinds of projects to keep Ursula's work in the public eye.

Then, I am a freelance writer. So I write book reviews. I write a column for *Reactor* and occasionally I write other things that I'm very lazy about pitching, so mostly I just write for them.

RR I love that! So like with all these book reviews and everything, … have you noticed how stress might be playing a part in what people are writing and maybe with what people are reading?

MT Yeah, I mean, especially since 2020 … it seems like I've had a really hard time with narrative and the way that I thought about it, especially … [when] the narrative of all of our lives changed so drastically and so quickly that it was hard to immerse yourself in a fictional narrative where things happened logically and in a progression while we were just sitting at home, not having a narrative. So, yeah, I think that, you know, being too busy or too stressed to read is a pretty common response.

RR And have you noticed kind of like any changing trends? Like, is there a certain genre that's kind of stood out to you since all this started?

MT I mean, if I could stop hearing about romantasy, I'd be excited about it. I'm happy for the romantasy people. It's just not my cup of tea. … I have read all of the Sarah J Maas books up to *Crescent City*, like, I'm good. I have been saturated.

RR Oh, oh yeah, definitely. Have you read the fourth wing series?

MT I have not. The impression that I got is that having read both Anne McCaffrey and a lot of other dragon fiction from previous decades and Sarah J Maas, I have the jist.

RR That is fair. Like it's pretty good but of course she still has to write book four and five. So, it's kind of like, if you do plan on reading it, maybe wait until she's writing book five. That's just me. Anyways, sorry that was a random segment. I like talking about books.

MT Oh no, it's okay. I mean I'm happy for all of the people who are so excited. [It's just that] every pitch I get for a book that's fantasy lately feels like it's romance even if it isn't like it's being shoehorned into this box to try to get people to pay attention. … I respect [the romance community] deeply. It's not not what I read for.

RR That's fair. And so how have you seen books changing since when you first started what you're doing now? Like have you seen a big change?

MT I've been in books in some way shape or form, basically, my entire professional life. My first job was in library marketing at Penguin [Random House] a million years ago and that was the late 90s and so things have drastically changed since then in large part due to the YA boom. I worked in kids' books before kids' books. It was really easy to get a job in children's books in the late 90s because it had no cachet. … I still see people in line like, "YA didn't exist before *Harry Potter*," which is like an incorrect statement on so many levels, but it just wasn't visible in the way that *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*. … [Those books] made YA, to some degree, much more visible to your average person. That is, you know, 25 years just drastically reversed that. People just didn't know what the children's books were back then. I mean, they knew about the classics, but they didn't know there were new books coming out all the time that were fantastic.

RR Wow, I actually didn't know that because I was born in '01 … .

MT You've never known about a world in which the YA publishing wasn't a jug. … Do you know about the Newbery and Caldecott awards, the American Library Association Awards?

RR No.

MT So those were, at the time, the biggest awards for young readers' books and even the Newbery Books just didn't make huge splashes in the same way that things do now.

RR Wow, that is wild. I'm really glad we get insight into that. And so going from the professional world, let's kind of take a segway into the personal and how has mood affected what you're reading?

MT It's always funny when I write columns because I have to sort of take a step back and think about how I read versus how an average person … might read because I'm always on a deadline for something and I'm always looking for column … topics. I have to remind myself that other people don't necessarily have that sense of, "I have to read things."

There's the trendiness of like, "Oh, you have to read whatever because … it is that you have to see this movie." … But I kind of assume that most people, when they're reading, pick by what they're feeling like reading. … Because I have a deadline and I have to read this and, you know,

maybe this will … cough up a topic for me. So my reading is a little bit more deadline driven than I think a lot of people are.

RR Do you ever get to read books that aren't deadline driven?

MT Yes. … So last year I wrote this Best Science Fiction list for *Esquire*, that took up my entire year. Like I literally read maybe seven books that weren't science fiction last year. It was intense. And so when that ended I was like I'm just gonna read absolutely anything that I want provided that I already have it. Because I have an insane TBR shelf from being in publishing and journalism for 20 years. Like it's just stupid. … So I was like, [read] whatever I want as long as I already have it, I'm not buying any books for this little bit. And it was interesting because it led me to some really great places and then I kept picking up books that I had wanted to read when I got them and being like, "What was I thinking?"

So yeah, … it's really fun to just kind of follow your whims.

RR Honestly yeah, it is. And so like, okay, it sounds like, obviously you are very stressed with everything you're doing, and so do those stressors impact what you read whenever you're out of that situation? … How much of an impact does stress have on your reading life?

MT Depends on how many deadlines I am looking at. I'm not, I just sound like I'm too busy. I'm just over caffeinated today. … Really it depends on sometimes if I'm super stressed, I just don't read. …

It really only comes into play if I have said that I'm going to review a book and then I don't like it. Because then I have to balance out like, do I kill the review because what's the point? Like there's only so many hours in life and I don't want to spend … hours … reading a book this big that I am not enjoying or is it worth writing a more critical response to this? I mean because some books are not that there's nothing to say about them … it's just, here's a book and it's fine.

So sometimes I worry about balancing that out about killing them versus being a little harsher than most people on the Internet these days are about books. … I don't know if I think about it that much.

RR … I know I don't really hardcore think about it. I just know when I'm stressed. Like either A, I read a lot because I'm trying to escape reality or B, I don't read at all because … I immensely can't handle it.

MT Yeah, and so much of it is the book you pick up, right? When I had COVID twice last year, both times I read a couple of books immersively and nothing else was interesting. Like I couldn't focus on TV or anything. I just wanted to read these books that I happened to pick up at that moment in time, even though I felt like garbage, they were somehow distracting enough.

RR … So my last little question is, is there anything else you want to tell me or you think that I should know? …

MT … The two things that I think about are when things are actually super stressful in the world, I tend to default more to watching TV and I love to watch TV about people who are more stressed than I am. Like I spent the whole first month of the pandemic rewatching *The Magicians* and the *Lost in Space* TV show because I was like, “Whatever's going on here I'm not flying through space in a chest freezer.” It could be so much more. …

But I also noticed that I tend to read a lot more nonfiction when the world is on fire. Not even current events, just like interesting narrative nonfiction. … I'm not like a huge nonfiction reader. … But this last month, I have just been going to nonfiction, and in 2020, I read so much nonfiction.