

If The Library Brand is “Books,” Why Not Read a Few? – Bringing Nonfiction Book Discussion to the Special Library

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Institutional Background

The Linda Hall Library, founded in 1946, is a world-class, independent research library of science, engineering, and technology open to the public. From its Kansas City, Missouri, location, the library provides reference, search and document delivery services to patrons around the globe, as well as public lectures and exhibitions of rare books. However, the library has at times found itself lost to the public of Kansas City. For a city of its size, Kansas City boasts a large number of cultural institutions, including (but not limited to) excellent public library systems, rich history and science museums and attractions, nationally recognized dance, opera, choral, and orchestral groups, vibrant theater and visual arts communities, not to mention the well-known jazz scene of the area. With all these cultural and intellectual attractions available in the area, in addition to many more pedestrian amusements, the Linda Hall Library is often referred to as a “hidden gem” of Kansas City.

Motivation

Current library staff would like nothing more than to place the library solidly within the cultural milieu of Kansas City. We believe that the citizens of our region need opportunities for dialogue and to learn more about the sciences and technology. In particular, many of the challenges our nation faces (managing dwindling resources, dealing with climate change, and

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rebuilding critical infrastructure) require both knowledge of the sciences and the ability to think critically about the implications of courses of action.

The difficulty that we face is attracting people to the library for special book-related programs. The Linda Hall Library is an exceptionally beautiful facility with well-maintained grounds that serve as a 14-acre urban arboretum. The aesthetic of the location has the seductive influence of encouraging staff to hold programs and events at the library, thereby embracing a “Field of Dreams” strategy for building community awareness and involvement. Unfortunately, in a media-saturated world with a multitude of leisure-time options for intellectual stimulation, the aphorism “if you build it, they will come” does not apply to our library. People will not come to the library and become engaged patrons if they do not know the library exists. Therefore, we sought to develop programs that we could conduct either at the library or beyond the library’s walls. By moving some of our programs out into the community, and then drawing people into our fine facilities, we believed that we could build committed patrons, future Friends of the Library, and community advocates to spread the news of the library through word-of-mouth marketing.

Program Choice

The majority of educational programming at the library consists of a successful lecture series hosted by the Friends of the Library. Except for brief question and answer sessions, the lectures represent a passive educational experience for the audience. While many of us were raised on the “sage on the stage” model of learning—especially in college—a different adult learning experience is possible through an interactive format that encourages active critical thinking and communication. We wanted to create programs with active audience participation

in order to attract individuals that find this kind of dialogue about scientific and technical topics missing in the local community.

To paraphrase the Chinese curse, we live in interesting times as information professionals in the early 21st century. With all the changes toward electronic access and screen-based formats for information and entertainment, people still look to public libraries in particular as sources of book information. The 2005 OCLC report on how the public perceives libraries specifically identified the “brand” of libraries being books.¹ While the OCLC report suggests that this brand represents a stumbling block for libraries, we see this branding as an opportunity to create programs that embrace the brand and attract public attention to the resources and services of our library.

Based on our motivation to implement interactive book programs, our ideas coalesced toward holding book discussion groups. We found encouragement by studying the existing programs at public libraries, particularly the many One Book programs initiated around the country. The concept of One Book originated with the Washington Center for the Book in 1998, the premise being a community-wide reading program, focused around a single work, with one or more events (including a book discussion) planned in conjunction with the reading program. The Center for the Book at the U.S. Library of Congress now maintains a website listing One Book programs from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom.² We also drew inspiration from the fact that most of these One Book programs dealt with works of fiction, and we were going to take the One Book concept in a slightly different direction.

Book Selection

We developed three criteria for book selection: 1) the book should deal with a scientific concept, 2) the book should be accessible to a non-specialist audience, and 3) the book should touch upon a current event or controversy. This focus meant discussion of works of non-fiction. While not as widely read in One Book discussion groups, non-fiction is a popular genre, especially in the subgenres of history and biography. There are many excellent science and technology books published every year; however, the challenge has been to select titles that lend themselves to absorbing conversations (gauging discussability is a top priority) and have an appeal factor.

Discussability

We have found that it can be tricky business selecting a choice nonfiction science or technology book for discussion. Thorough and skillfully written, many ‘best science books’ trace the historical development of a theory, concept, or invention. Others offer meticulous biographies of scientists. When an expert author leaves little ground uncovered, these books can make for rather dull discussion, especially if the facilitator and group members are not familiar with the topic prior to reading the text. Joan Bessman Taylor, Assistant Professor in the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Iowa, advises avoiding books that are deemed too complete, too clear, or too succinct, and to avoid journalistic accounts as these texts do not leave much room for discussion.³

A good candidate for discussability may contain controversy and loose ends that incite speculation and critical thinking. A discussible work might also take a non-linear approach and may pose questions directly to the reader. Our first selection, Charles Wohlforth’s *The Whale*

and the Supercomputer flitted back and forth between multiple viewpoints of scientists, politicians, and the Inupiat people of Barrow Alaska; it left several gaps in the narrative and deliberately denied the reader a definitive, author-endorsed conclusion about climate change. A rich tapestry of conversation threads resulted.

Bessman Taylor refers to the narrative gaps that enable discussion as ‘bloopholes,’ which invite the reader to discuss the work critically. Bloopholes are not for everyone, and Bessman Taylor concedes that while some readers may find these “gaps in the narrative distracting or disruptive” that “these same gaps become seeds for negotiating options, improvising, and creating flights of fancy within the group context.” Bloopholes have the power to provoke more meaningful responses, empowering readers to take a stance and to create meaning about a work for themselves. Instead of viewing bloopholes as deficiencies, it is sensible to consider the gaps as portals to great conversations.⁴

Appeal Factors

Once we decided that a book had decent discussability, we needed to know how to conduct a good discussion. While this point might seem trivial, we had all been part of a bad book discussion before, and wanted to ensure that we prepared adequately to keep a group interested in a book, ready to re-fire conversation if the pace waned or the dialogue veered off in some tangential direction.

At this point, we re-discovered Readers’ Advisory (RA) concepts familiar to many public librarians. The Readers’ Advisory function at a public library helps patrons determine what to read next. Traditionally, this function plays an especially important role in helping readers identify their next favorite author or story in a particular genre. True RA involves more than title

or author selection, and can realize its fullest promise in assisting a patron in creating a personal reading program for either enjoyment or education.

While every librarian loves to read, no one can aspire to have the answer to every RA inquiry from their personal readings list. How can a librarian then adequately assess whether a particular work is a good recommendation for a particular patron? In the past, librarians focused on matching genres, so a reader who liked cyberpunk science fiction like William Gibson was more likely to receive recommendations for authors like Philip K. Dick instead of sci-fi/fantasy authors like J.R.R. Tolkein.

Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown's fine book *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* presented a structure for selecting works in RA based not upon genre, but instead basing selection on "appeal." Saricks and Brown introduced four appeal concepts: pacing, character, story line, and frame.⁵ By identifying the patron's interests within these appeal concepts, the RA librarian can be comfortable in recommending books from outside the patron's current reading genres. For example, a patron may be reading noir detective novels set in Minneapolis because of the breathless plot sequence, or because she is interested in the portrayal of the principal investigator, or because she likes police procedurals, or because she happens to enjoy the details of this city in the 1940's. Learning what the appeal factors are for the patron can steer the RA librarian to suggest other works, say, in mystery or true crime, that contain the same elements that attracted the patron to the noir detective novels she has already read.

Recently, RA librarians have begun to re-consider these appeal concepts in an effort to find terminologies that allow them to describe a book's appeal with greater precision. For example, the "frame" concept in appeal can be described with terms like description, language, setting, style, affect, mood, tone, and learning/experiencing (within the context of the narrator or

author). According to Neal Wyatt, this effort to refine concepts has led to more re-thinking of RA choices across genres, using the appeal formulation to conduct “genre sliding” or recommendations across reader genre preferences.⁶ Wyatt reports that Joyce Saricks and Nancy Pearl have both created re-grouped concepts containing the fundamental elements of reader appeal in an effort to facilitate genre sliding. While Saricks uses adrenaline, intellect, emotion, and landscape, Pearl uses story, setting, character, and language.

The appeal concept resonated with us as a useful framework for evaluating and discussing non-fiction, even though the literature we had read gave examples principally from works of fiction. We decided to use both discussability and appeal in our decision process for selecting books, and as tools within our book discussion preparations.

The First One Book Program

In 2007 we chose *The Whale and the Supercomputer: On the Northern Front of Climate Change* by Charles Wohlforth for the first One Book program. The topic of climate change is a timely one and the author agreed to participate in our One Book blog. Because this was a new program, operating on a limited budget, we did not invite the author to attend the discussion. Six staff members were trained in the Great Books Foundation Shared Inquiry Method, a method of group discussion facilitation. We publicized the event in our quarterly newsletter and on our website (including our blog); distributed posters to local public libraries, coffee shops and bookstores; and mailed postcards to our library’s mailing list. Thirty-six people attended the event and we split into three small groups for discussion. In addition to the main book discussion event, we sponsored follow-up events that included an online lecture by a local university professor and follow-up book discussions at local public library branches.

The Whale and the Supercomputer proved to have both discussability and appeal. The wide range of climate change issues and the well-developed characterizations of the scientists and Inupiat peoples provided the focus for much of the discussion. In addition, the author's easy-to-understand scientific explanations of climate change modeling provided an intellectual appeal for many of the attendees.

Second One Book Program

In February 2008 we read and discussed *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins. We chose this book because it was written by a high-profile scientist and is of enduring importance. Although it was published in 1976, it has never gone out of print.

Although our attendance (25) was lower than our first One Book program due to winter weather and the Kansas democratic caucus the night of our event, *The Selfish Gene* had excellent discussability and appeal. Dawkins', an outspoken critic of religion in recent years, has become a controversial figure in science and popular culture. This controversy was evident throughout the evening and made for lively discussion. The intellectual appeal factor also was significant with this book. Dawkins' writing style made difficult technical information easily understandable. Also, his use of humor and anecdotes provided many starting points for discussion.

Reference staff has led four book discussion on *The Selfish Gene* at public library branches and we have two more scheduled in the fall.

Beyond the One Book

In response to positive feedback from our One Book program, we initiated three additional book-related programs at the library within the last two years. Our first new program was the creation of "Periodic Roundtable Book Discussions" (pun intended—we *are* a science

library after all!). The Periodic Roundtables are smaller, less-formal book discussions led by individual reference librarians. The book selection process is also less structured: most books are selected by individual reference librarians based on their reading preferences. Books chosen for the Periodic Roundtable include:

- *Miss Leavitt's Stars* by George Johnson (this book discussion was held at a planetarium),
- *Our Inner Ape* by Frans de Waal,
- *Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman* by Richard P. Feynman as told to Ralph Leighton, edited by Edward Hutchings,
- *The Door in the Dream: Conversations with Eminent Women in Science* by Elga Wasserman,
- *Hope is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds* by Chris Cokinos,
- *Beyond Oil* by Kenneth Deffeyes, and
- *Sputnik: The Shock of the Century* by Paul Dickson. (Mr. Dickson joined this discussion via conference call.)

Depending on the size of the group and interest in the book, discussions are sometimes more of a “book talk.”

A second initiative has been the publication of a quarterly newsletter, *Great Sci-Tech Reads*, in which library staff members are encouraged to submit short reviews of sci-tech books—including science fiction or fiction that features science or natural history topics. The newsletter is published quarterly and distributed to patrons and Friends.

The third initiative is a “Book-A-Night at the Library” hosted by the Head of Reference. The Book-A-Night is a book talk specifically for the Friends of the Library that features five or

six new books in our collection or a selection of books on a “hot” topic. The net Book-A-Night is titled “Engineer Matters” and will bring new insights into accomplishments and critiques of engineering, both past and present. Attendees are not required (nor expected) to have read the books. Rather, the format is an interactive book review with discussion of topics related to the selection of books.

Conclusion

Our experiences with nonfiction book discussions have been positive. Through these programs we are attracting new people to the library, improving staff’s scientific literacy, and increasing attendance at and membership in other library programs. Our future plans for books discussion include expanding our partnerships with local public libraries and universities, inviting local experts to be co-discussion leaders, and sponsoring lectures on the topic of the book to complement discussions.

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