

# YOUR NEXT

Creating a new kind of readers' advisory service reenergized staff and increased the relevance of the Tulsa City-County Library

By Rebecca Howard  
& Laura Raphael

# GREAT READ

**Readers' advisory (RA)** has been a service of public libraries for decades. Librarians have used many strategies to connect individual readers with books: displays, in-person RA interviews, discussion groups, read-alike lists, posters, blogs, and social networking tools.

This is important because reading is alive and well in our country. A whopping 79 percent of American adults read a book in the past month, according to the recent Pew Research Center report "Reading Habits in Different Communities." Committed readers are often the most active champions of public libraries; deeply engaging with them helps to ensure library relevancy and sustainability.

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Like many librarians, however, we faced a disconnect when it came to providing face-to-face RA service. We didn't always get the opportunity to do so. Most library customers didn't know they could ask for book suggestions at Tulsa's large urban Central Library. On the rare occasions when people approached the desk to request "a good book to read," the responses varied dramatically depending on who was working the desk and how comfortable they felt answering RA questions.

While we wanted to draw readers through stories that would inform, educate, delight, and even empower them and establish relationships so we could follow up with these readers, we fell far short of that ideal. Frequently, we froze up and could not think of a title, or had to cut our interactions short because the desk became too busy. We sought ways to reach more readers and improve the quality of the face-to-face RA service we provided.

Our answer came in the form of personalized, form-based RA. Such a model was first launched a decade ago by the Williamsburg Regional Library, VA. Reading Neal Hollands's 2006 article "Improving the Model for Interactive Readers'



**RECOMMENDED READING** At Tulsa City-County Library, above, the Your Next Great Read program offers personalized suggestions for each reader based on genre, format, tone, focus, and favorite books and authors. At right is a sample report

Advisory” (*Reference & User Services Quarterly*) immediately convinced us to make the change. The faulty assumptions he outlined mirrored our experience. We loved the idea that readers could complete a form detailing their reading tastes, preferences, and current moods—taking time to reflect as needed—after which librarians would create reading guides based on their deep consideration of the best books for that reader. It completely transformed our RA service.

## Launching “Your Next Great Read”

In 2011, we launched Your Next Great Read, Tulsa City-County Library’s (TCCL) personalized, form-based RA service. Since then, our team has completed nearly 1000 guides for readers (see at right for an example of the first two pages of a completed guide), who have been almost universally appreciative of the personalized service. We regularly get comments like these:

You did a *wonderful* job! I am so excited to read these books. I tried Goodreads, but I feel like this service is better because I actually get a chance to say why I liked or didn’t like a book and what’s important to me when looking for something new to read. It is also helpful to be told why someone picked this book for you.

This is excellent! This is the first time I have used Your Next Great Read, and I was not expecting personalized service. I thought it would be a computer-generated list. I love the personal attention to my questionnaire, and the suggestions and comments from a real person make them so much more meaningful. I especially love the “Reasons” you have given for selecting the books. It’s great hearing the opinion of another reader. There are five books in the list that I plan to read based on your comments alone.... I very much appreciate this; thank you.

The new service provided the personal engagement with readers and gave us the time and space to consider fully the best choices for the tastes and preferences of each

## Personalized Reading Suggestions for Jane Reader

### Appeal Factors

- I selected authors and books based upon the following subject interests and appeal factors:
- ✓ **Genres:** Mysteries, Thrillers, Horror, Romantic Suspense
  - ✓ **Format:** eBooks or Large Print, Less than 500 pages
  - ✓ **Tone:** Happy, light, uplifting; Easy; Funny; Dark, ironic; Demanding; Serious; Suspenseful/tense; Original/unusual; Intricately plotted (lots of twists and turns)
  - ✓ **Focus:** Characters, Action and events
  - ✓ **Favorite titles/authors:** Heather Graham, Dean Koontz, The Shack, James Patterson, Jeffrey Deaver

### Authors you might like

#### Lisa Gardner

After a successful career writing Romantic Suspense as Alicia Scott, Lisa Baumgardner turned to the Suspense genre and adopted Lisa Gardner as her pseudonym. As Gardner she writes contemporary tales of fast-paced Suspense with strong romantic undercurrents and is known for her appealing characters, twisting plots, forensic details, powerful descriptions, and natural dialog. Her protagonists are generally investigators, and she offers an assortment of intriguing series and non-series characters in all her books. Start with: *Alone*.

#### Dennis Lehane

Dennis Lehane’s powerful evocations of place, intricate plots, and multi-dimensional characters have made him one of today’s best crime and suspense storytellers. In his series following PI’s Patrick Kenzie and Angie Gennaro, Lehane explores crime in Boston’s toughest neighborhoods, vividly depicted with physical details and local mannerisms. Violence is graphic in these gritty stories, and often falls on the innocent. Fast-moving plots feature suspenseful twists, as the characters’ darkest traits and emotional scars are revealed to both detectives and readers. Start with: *Mystic River*.

#### John Sandford

John Sandford stands out for his consistent delivery of riveting characters and intense, richly-layered plots in his Prey series, Kidd series, and his stand-alone novels. Crime drives his stories, whether his heroes are the ones solving or the ones committing the crime. Intricate details and graphic violence lend a gritty realism to the tone of these books, while maintaining a fast, suspenseful pace. Quirky characters and witty dialogue relieve the tension. Sandford’s good guys and bad guys alike are intriguing, complex, and realistically flawed. Start with: *Rules of Prey*.

#### Dan Simmons

Dan Simmons is a genre-bending author known for novels with any combination of horror, science fiction, suspense, thriller and historical fiction. Despite his inability to be pigeon-holed by genre, Simmons’ novels are all character-focused, provocative stories with a deliberate pace that allows the tension to build so intensely that it makes readers squirm—and they love it. Readers crave the interesting and thought-provoking details that Simmons peppers throughout his novels. Recently, he has begun to focus his work on real historical characters, adding a twist of dark, speculative elements. Start with: *The Terror*.

### Titles you might enjoy:

	<b>Deviant Ways</b> by Chris Mooney Former FBI profiler Jack Casey, now a detective in a coastal community outside Boston, finds his new life threatened by the arrival of the Sandman, a demented killer who stalks entire families and neighborhoods. “Mooney’s novel is a violent, action-filled tale, but it rises above many run-of-the-mill serial-killer thrillers because all the high-blown action always has a personal consequence and because the characters are sufficiently defined to make us care what happens to them” ( <i>BookList</i> review). Reason: An action-packed, character-driven mystery and psychological thriller that is suggested for fans of Jeffrey Deaver.
	<b>The Ruins</b> by Scott Smith Two American couples, just out of college, enjoy a pleasant, lazy beach holiday together in Mexico. On an impulse, they go off with newfound friends in search of one of their group—the young German, who, in pursuit of a girl, has headed for the remote Mayan ruins, site of a fabled archeological dig. Then the searchers—moving into the wild interior—begin to suspect that there is an insidious, horrific “other” among them. <i>Publishers Weekly</i> describes it as a “stunning horror thriller.” Reason: Psychological horror with a compelling and suspenseful storyline.
	<b>You're Next</b> by Greb Andrew Hurwitz The Boss Man has an unexpected motive in destroying Mike Wingate, who’s worked his way up from the bottom to become a successful home contractor in Lost Hills, California. To protect his family and himself, Mike, who was raised in a foster home, summons his only friend from those days, the formidable Shep, who has grown up to be a career criminal of considerable skill. <i>Library Journal</i> calls it a “first-rate thriller” (starred review) and named it as one of the best thrillers of 2011. Reason: An action-packed psychological thriller.
	<b>Heart-Shaped Box</b> by Joe Hill A collector of obscure and macabre artifacts, unscrupulous metal band musician Judas Coyne is unable to resist purchasing a ghost over the Internet, which turns out to be the vengeful spirit of his late girlfriend’s stepfather. Reason: A fast-paced horror with richly drawn characters and a menacing, suspenseful tone. Recipient of the Bram Stoker award for “Best First Novel.”
	<b>Sworn to Silence</b> by Linda Castillo Kate Burkholder, a former Amish resident of Painters Mill, is returning as police chief sixteen years after a series of brutal murders took place there, but when a new victim is found under her watch, she struggles with a secret that could hurt both her and her family. “Deeply flawed characters in a distinctive setting make this a crackling good series opener” ( <i>BookList</i> starred review). Reason: This is the first in a multi-book series featuring Kate Burkholder. It features a strong, interesting female protagonist, a fast-paced plot, and a compelling central mystery.
	<b>Sizzle and Burn</b> by Jayne Ann Krentz Lonely and reluctant psychic Raine Tallentyre is targeted for recruitment into the secret Arcane Society by fellow psychic Zack Jones, an effort that is complicated by Raine’s painful memories of how the organization shattered her family through an act of betrayal. “Writing with her usual sharp wit, Krentz continues her loosely connected, addictively readable series featuring the Arcane Society with another brilliantly crafted novel that deftly fuses paranormal-flavored suspense with sizzling sexy romance” ( <i>BookList</i> starred review). Reason: Suggested based on your enjoyment of Heather Graham, this is a character-driven romantic suspense.
	<b>Out of Body</b> by Stella Cameron When she glimpses the fate of two missing New Orleans jazz singers, Marley Millet, born of an ancient family of clairvoyants, after going to the police, catches the attention of cop-turned-writer Gray Fisher who is interested in her story as well as in her. “Cameron compellingly develops the sexy, bold protagonists and Marley’s charming family as she strikes the perfect balance of action, sassy dialogue, and steamy love scenes: never excessive, just enough to leave readers wanting more” ( <i>Publishers Weekly</i> starred review). Reason: A read-alike suggestion for Heather Graham. First in a multi-book series, this is an intricately plotted, fast-paced romantic suspense.
	<b>A Dark Matter</b> by Peter Straub Old friends try to come to grips with the darkness of the past—a secret ritual that left behind a gruesomely dismembered body—and find themselves face-to-face with the evil they helped create. “Brilliant in its orchestration and provocative in its speculations, this novel ranks as one of the finest tales of modern horror” ( <i>Publishers Weekly</i> starred review). Reason: A creepy and suspenseful horror story. Winner of the Bram Stoker award for Best Novel.

and match each individual reader to the best RA librarian for their needs.

### Forming a service

The process of creating Your Next Great Read was not easy. We spent nearly eight months researching the service, planning how we could do it, experimenting with various approaches, and, finally, getting approval and buy-in from various administrative levels in our library. Then we selected and trained people to staff the team and figured out how to market and promote the service, organize the responses, and keep everything running smoothly.

Maintaining the Your Next Great Read service is not a cinch, either. We have all become better and faster at initiating guides, but it still takes time and considerable effort to consider a reader's individual preferences and select authors and titles that are a good match. Keeping track of all of the forms and guides and communicating with readers take time and effort, too.

Despite the work, generating and implementing a personalized, form-based RA service is worth it. It is one of the best services a library can offer to energize staff and connect with readers. It increases the library's relevance and value in the eyes of users.

The list of benefits in our initial proposal is an excellent overview of why libraries should consider starting a similar service:

- Allows time for customer and staff to complete a deeper and deliberate RA interaction
- Promotes the additional RA services provided by the library
- Validates reading suggestions as an important, integral part of library services
- Gives staff and customers a way to discuss books using appeal factors
- Creates a tangible "product" that is seen as more valuable in the eyes of staff and customers
- Offers a human and democratic alternative in the marketplace of reading/viewing suggestions (i.e., Amazon, Netflix, Barnes & Noble personal shopper, Goodreads, etc.).

### A boost to staff morale

The most surprising benefit of Your Next Great Read was the boost it gave to staff morale, energy, and confidence.

Creating personalized reading guides is intellectually challenging and psychologically rewarding. Unlike the automatic, low-level tasks of circulation, shelving, and sim-



**ADVISORY ON THE SPOT** For those needing on-the-spot advice, displays and signage offer suggestions in real time (top l., read-alikes add value to a best sellers list; top r., a thematic display of related titles). At left is a portion of the Your Next Great Read survey as filled out by a patron with preferences for more titles

**Reads Like Strout**

If you enjoy Elizabeth Strout's character-driven, literary fiction that explores families in a realistic way, you'll love these books:

**carry one**

Reads Like Strout

Comments: I enjoy reading stories. I rarely enjoy informational books or how to do it books. Thank you!

3. Please list 3 of your FAVORITE books and/or authors.

- Book or author - Anne Frank
- Book or author - The Night Circus
- Book or author - The Hunger Games Series
- Book or author - Twilight Series
- Book or author - Harry Potter Series

4. If you would like, explain why you did NOT enjoy these books or authors.

I did not enjoy this book because the description of objects were so in depth I became bored with the section and skipped portions to finish the book for a college lit class. It was the only time I have skipped portions of a book.

5. Complete this sentence: "I need to like books that..."

Challenge me to think what would I do in there place.

6. Challenge this sentence: "I need NOT to like books that..."

I can remember a few books I have not finished, the style of writing was difficult to read and I became bored of the book because it was taking too long to read so I wasn't pulled into the story. I think one was a translated book, but the others were "classics".

7. Is there anything else about your reading tastes or current reading mood that we should take into consideration while preparing your customized reading suggestion list?

I am becoming less interested with books on dating. I have recently been a serious relationship and find I am more interested in books on brides than I used to be.

*Combiner romantic, lyrical language with storytelling*

- \*The Light Between Oceans
- \*The Magicians
- \*Summer of My German Soldier
- \*Guernsey Literary and Potato Cake Club etc.
- \*The Historian
- Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell
- Kafka on the Shore
- \*A Confederacy of Duncans?
- One Hundred Years of Solitude
- Greek Love
- \*Anne of Green Gables
- \*White Is for Witchery
- \*Fair Warning - Robert Owen Butler
- \*Love in the Time of Cholera
- Angela Carter
- William Gibson
- Kate Morton
- \*A Complicity of Pains - David Liss
- \*The Name of the Rose
- \*Oscar & Lucinda
- \*Correll's Madeline
- \*Evening Class

# Creating Reading Guides: Readiness Is All

To start creating personalized reading guides, the more preparation, the better. Here are Tulsa's top form-based readers' advisory (RA) readiness tips:

**1 Training, training, training.** To guarantee good personalized reading guides, have a firm grounding in RA precepts as well as a general knowledge of popular genres and authors.

We developed our own RA training course to prepare our Your Next Great Read team. If such training is not an option, we recommend these excellent resources:

- The Popular Fiction Checklist created by the Adult Reading Round Table (ARRT) of Illinois ([www.arrtreads.org](http://www.arrtreads.org))
- The Readers' Advisory Toolbox available via NoveList
- *Book Lust* and *More Book Lust* by Nancy Pearl

For training on form-based RA in particular, including practice in creating reading guides, ALA Editions will offer for a fee our six-week "Re-Thinking Readers' Advisory: An Interactive Approach" e-course starting on November 4.

**2 Create your form carefully—and don't be afraid to change it!** The reading guide you give to readers begins with the form they complete describing their own reading tastes and desires. If your form doesn't help you identify what readers are looking for—especially what appeals to them most—you won't be able to create a valuable guide for them.

First take a look at what other libraries have done. Our first form was based on what Williamsburg Regional Library, VA, uses for its "Looking for a good book?" service. We were also charmed by Seattle Public Library's "Your Next 5 Reads," one open-ended question inviting readers to describe books and authors they've enjoyed in the past and why.

Don't be afraid to change your form according to what is working and what is not. Responding to an informal evaluation by our team members, we shortened and refined our form, deleting sections librarians weren't using—and that many readers neglected to complete—and adding more open-ended questions. These changes improved the reading guides and more were completed as a result.

**3 Always be reading.** Reading widely in a variety of genres and paying attention to their appeal factors is one of the best ways to know where to start looking for authors and titles to include in a personalized reading guide. If you've read, or at least have heard of, Tracy Chevalier, for example, you'll know to avoid suggesting legal thrillers for that reader and instead explore other European historical novels.

**4 Remember: It's an RA interview...on paper.** If you have any experience or training in RA work, you're ahead of the game. What makes this service different from the typical, in-person RA interview is that it's conducted through the medium of writing. The form gives readers the space to consider their own tastes, but it also gives you the time and space to consider books and authors that will match those tastes.

Nevertheless, all of the hallmarks of a good RA interview in person are valid in a form-based readers' advisory interview, too, including a nonjudgmental approach, careful thought about reading appeals, and applying your knowledge and tools to find the best works for each user.

more ways than one. This "emotional labor" cuts both ways, however. When you increase your positive interactions with the people you help directly, the impact of common, daily library problems dissipates. Your Next Great Read is not about the form, the survey tool, or even the guide itself; it is about people connecting to people and a generating relationship around the act of reading. This relationship is a powerful and positive one—for reader and librarian alike.

For example, as a freshman in college, Rebecca Howard read Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* in a Native American literature course. Never having read anything like this before, Rebecca changed her major to English soon after and became a lifelong believer in story. Twenty years later, she had the opportunity to share Erdrich with another reader through Your Next Great Read. In a follow-up survey, this reader singled out Erdrich as a new favorite in response to the question, "Please list authors or books from your earlier set of suggestions that you particularly enjoyed." She wrote, "All of Louise Erdrich" and continued, "Your selections were perfect for me. Thank you." This interaction was enough to keep Howard smiling the rest of the day.

## Advisory as advocacy

More than energizing staff, implementing Your Next Great Read has positioned our library as a central place for serving

readers, strengthening our impact on the community.

We are admirers of the "life cycle librarianship" model that Bill Crowley developed, which emphasizes the role of public libraries as supporting reading and lifelong learning. He argues that libraries will remain relevant and valuable by addressing the "human learning needs from lapsit to nursing home." Our experience with Your Next Great read has borne that out.

Laura Raphael recently met a Your Next Great Read participant while she was working at the public service desk. Glancing at Raphael's name badge, this customer exclaimed, "Wait, you're Laura? You made my reading guide!" A bit nervously, Raphael asked how the woman liked the suggestions, and the enthusiastic response was—"Are you kidding? I've loved most of them so far! You're my new best friend! Now whenever I'm looking for something to read, I just go back to your list, and I know I'm going to find something good."

This librarian-reader connection, in addition to earning new best friends, forms the core of quality readers' advisory service. The enthusiasm in this customer's response is her saying, "You get me!" Our affirmation and understanding of readers not only result in satisfied customers, they also creates a strong foundation of public support for the library's role in the community. ■