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Tulsa Library program matches readers with books

■ Questionnaire helps librarians make suggestions.



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Shirley Pomeranz wasn't expecting much when she filled out an online questionnaire on the Tulsa library's website that promised to find her "next great read."

"I thought it would be automated," Pomeranz said.

But the library's Your Next Great Read program is no algorithm-based service. The guide featuring suggested authors and titles is put together by an actual librarian who has carefully read the questionnaire-taker's answers.

"We spend time on it. We really try to think carefully about each person," said Laura Raphael, one of two librarians who launched the Tulsa City-County Library's readers advisory service about two years ago.

The result is a list that offers individualized suggestions of 3-5 authors and 8-10 titles, complete with the reasoning behind why the librarian thinks you will enjoy the book.

Tulsa's library is not the first to create a written reader's advisory system, but Your Next Great Read has gained some national attention recently for its depth.

An article submitted by Raphael and program coordinator Rebecca Howard was published in Library Journal in October. And the two are currently in the middle of leading a six-week e-course offered to other librarians across the country through the American Library Association.

"We realized that other libraries may be looking for guidance on creating something like this," Raphael said.

Tulsa librarians have completed more than 1,000 personalized lists since the service began, with an average of 25-30 per month. Eight people, including Raphael and Howard, work on the lists.

Howard said the time it takes to make each list differs. Some can take 1-2 hours, if a librarian has similar tastes as a reader and can therefore identify books more easily. Others may take more time because research is needed.

Raphael said the survey answers provide pieces in a puzzle that help librarians form the lists. For example, the Tulsa questionnaire asks readers about their favorite TV shows.

"TV shows help you understand what humor is acceptable to them," Howard said.

Reader's advisory has always been a service that libraries offer, though most of the time it was through in-person, on-the-spot contact.

The written forms have enabled librarians to spend more time contemplating readers' explanations of what books they like and why, so as to make better suggestions.

Pomeranz, who went through all the suggestions on her first list and is now making her way through the second, said she was amazed at how much she enjoyed all the suggested titles.

"It's given me such pleasure," she said.

Reader's advisory is one of the most rewarding aspects of a librarian's job, Howard said.

"This is what we signed up for," she said.

Raphael said she views librarians as the "conduit between readers and books."

"I think we've turned people onto things that they wouldn't have discovered," she said.

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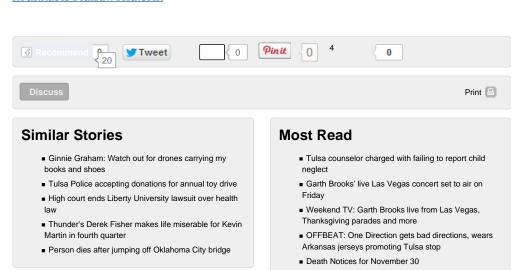
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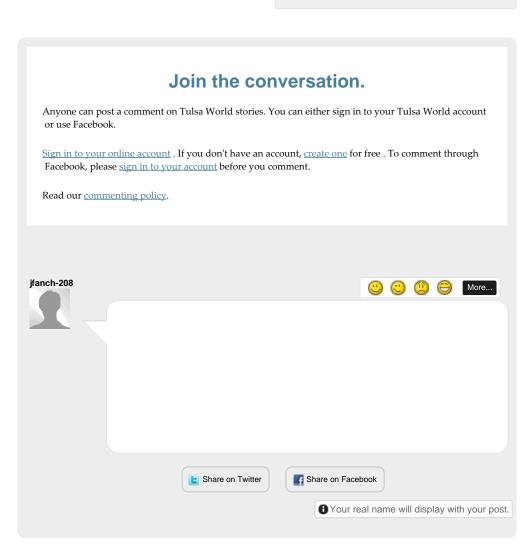
What: A reader's advisory service that provides a personalized suggestion list for library patrons who are ages 16 and older. Lists are generated within 7-10 days of when a questionnaire is submitted.

Link: tulsalibrary.org/your-next-great-read

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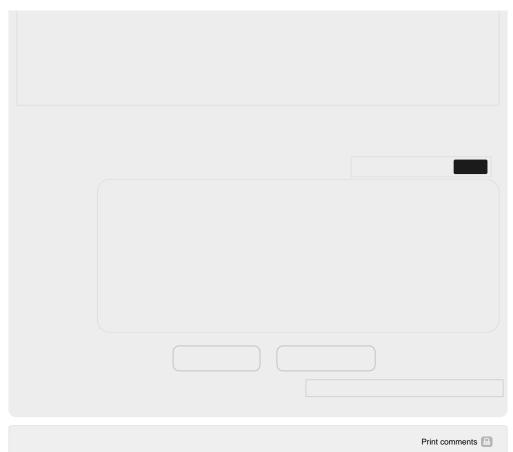
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