

**A Resource Guide to Form-Based RA:
What Asynchronous RA Can Teach All of Us
(even those not offering such an option)
About Service, Appeal, and Working With Readers**

This guide to resources accompanies the CODES Conversation “Form-Based RA: What Asynchronous RA Can Teach All of Us (even those not offering such an option) About Service, Appeal, and Working With Readers,” hosted by the Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA) Collection Development and Evaluation Section (CODES).

The conversation is open to all (you don’t need to be a member of ALA or of CODES) and takes place September 24-25, 2013. **To join the discussion, subscribe to the ALA email list located at <http://lists.ala.org/sympa/subscribe/codes-convos>, then follow and contribute (or lurk) as you wish.**

Articles

Hollands, Neil. “Improving the Model for Interactive Readers' Advisory Service.” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2006): 205-212.

Kuzyk, Raya. “A Reader at Every Shelf.” *Library Journal* 131, no. 3 (2006): 32-35.

Sutton, Cathy. “Library 2.0 and Readers’ Advisory,” *The RIFFED Librarian*, last modified 3/4/2012. <http://theriffedlibrarian.blogspot.com/2012/03/library-20-and-readers-advisory.html>.

Wright, David. “Your Next Five Books: What Form-Based Readers' Advisory Can Do for You.” *Alki*, 27, no.3 (2011): 9-10. You can also access a list of many of The Seattle Public Library’s Next Five Read responses here: <http://shelftalk.spl.org/tag/your-next-5-books/>

Wyatt, Neal. “Take the RA Talk Online.” *Library Journal* 133, no. 3 (2008): 32-34.

Webinars & Presentations

Howard, Rebecca and Laura Raphael, “Rethinking Readers' Advisory: An Interactive Approach” (ALA webinar, August 7, 2013): <http://www.slideshare.net/ALATechSource/re-thinking-readers-advisory-73113>

Stock, Melissa, “Personalized Online Reading” (Presentation at Colorado Association of Libraries Readers’ Advisory Summer Workshop, August 6, 2013): <http://melissalibrarian.com/personalized-online-reading-lists-my-presentation/>

Examples

Below are two lengthy examples, illustrating two different approaches, to form-based RA. The first is from the Williamsburg Regional Library (VA) and the second is from The Seattle Public Library (WA). Each example begins with a text copy of their online form and is followed by their response.

From Williamsburg Regional Library's Looking for a Good Book program:

Sample of a filled out form (with identification removed):

--CONTACT INFORMATION--

Name: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Email Address: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Telephone number:

Today's Date: 2013-02-14

Are you a local resident? No

--DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION--

Gender: Female

Age: 50

Race or Ethnicity: white

--PREFERRED METHOD OF CONTACT--

Contact me: Email

--GENRES AND FORMATS --

- Recent Titles: OK
- Classic Titles: OK
- Literary Fiction: NO
- Non-Fiction: High Interest
- Mysteries: OK
- Fantasy: High Interest
- Historical Fiction: High Interest
- Biography/Memoir: OK
- Romance: NO
- Thrillers: High Interest
- Action/Adventure: High Interest
- Horror: High Interest
- Inspirational (Religious): OK
- Science Fiction: High Interest
- Urban/Hip Hop: NO
- Romantic Suspense: OK
- Western: High Interest
- Chick-Lit: NO
- Graphic Novels: OK
- Young Adult: OK

- Short Stories: OK
- Large Print: NO
- Multi-Book Series: OK
- Audiobooks: OK

--READING HISTORY--

Favorite Titles and Authors:

Jim Butcher -- Dresden Files series. I like the detailed settings and wry humor. The characters change and grow, the series is not a "cookie-cutter" repeat. A new, exciting, slightly edgy thriller each book.

Jasper Fforde -- Thursday Next series. Crazy fun! Literary humor, multitude of plots that seem disconnected yet all come together at the end.

To Kill a Mockingbird -- Scout's POV is powerful and recognizable (as a kid when I first read it and now as an adult). I can picture the town, the characters are real, and I wanted Atticus to be my dad.

Fahrenheit 451 - Ray Bradbury. Profound, creative, exciting, visionary. If all books were being burned I would risk my life to save this one!

Quiet: The Power of Introverts... by Susan Cain. I like books that gives me insight into myself or others. This book did both.

Nonfavorite Titles and Authors:

Catcher in the Rye - didn't get the big deal. The main character was not interesting to me. I don't enjoy series that repeat the same story over and over again, like Joanna Fluke. If you read one, you've read them all (in my opinion). I need twists, pow, surprise. Even killing off a character I love is better than nothing happening. The same old same old gets...well, old. I know some folks find comfort in sameness. It drives me batty.

Straight humor, not my cup of tea. I do like humor if it is interwoven into the story (like with Thursday Next and Harry Dresden Files). But if a book is just straight humor ... not so much.

--TONE, STYLE, MOOD, AND LANGUAGE

- Happy, Light, Uplifting (1) to Dark, Ironical (7): 7
- Funny (1) to Serious (7): 5
- Familiar, Typical of its Type (1) to Unusual (7): 6
- Easy (1) to Demanding (7): 5
- Old-Fashioned, Traditional (1) to Modern, Contemporary (7): 4
- One Plot Line (1) to Many Plot Lines (7): 6
- Sentimental, Emotional Style (1) to Stark, Realistic Style (7): 5
- Safe, Relaxing (1) to Suspenseful, Tense (7): 7
- Resolved Ending (1) to Leaves You Thinking (7): 5
- Straightforward Language (1) to Lush, Poetic Language (7): 3

--FOCUS (Click on the arrow to the left to expand this section of the form)--

- Focus on Characters: High Interest
- Focus on Action and Events: High Interest
- Focus on Issues and Ideas: High Interest
- Focus on Language and Style: Low Interest

--HUMOR (Click on the arrow to the left to expand this section of the form)--

- Clever Dialogue: High Interest
- Dark Humor/Irony: High Interest
- Absurd Humor - Bizarre or Surreal: Medium Interest
- Humorous Situations/Events: Low Interest
- Quirky Characters: High Interest
- Slapstick/Physical Humor: Low Interest
- Wordplay: High Interest

--LENGTH (Click on the arrow to the left to expand this section of the form)--

- Less than 250 pages: Preferred
- 250-500 pages: Preferred
- Over 500 pages: OK

--CHARACTERS (Click on the arrow to the left to expand this section of the form)--

Characters who are sure of themselves (1) to Conflicted characters (7): 4
Few characters (1) to many characters (7):

Occupational Fields or Areas of Interest: I like a wide variety of characters - matters not. The more diversity the better.

--PEEVES AND PLEASURES --

- Sexual Themes: Ignore
- Explicit Sexual Content: Ignore
- Rough or Obscene Language: Ignore
- War: Ignore
- Violence: Ignore
- Death: Ignore
- Disease: Ignore
- Crime Portrayed Sympathetically: Ignore
- Dark or Cynical Humor: Ignore
- Technology: Ignore
- Anti-religion: Avoid
- Pro-religion: Avoid
- Left Wing Politics: Avoid
- Right Wing Politics: Avoid
- Addiction: Avoid

Other? not sure if I filled this section correctly. I'm very open

-- not any pet peeves. Just nothing with strong politics or religion

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[cont.]

The response sent by the team at Williamsburg:

Thank You!

For "*Looking for a Good Book*" at the Williamsburg Regional Library

After reviewing your profile, we've identified the following books, authors, and series that you might enjoy. All the titles listed are in the collection of either the Williamsburg or James City County Library.

As you read some of these books, we hope you'll provide us with feedback. Sometimes we provide great suggestions on the first try, while in other cases, we need to adjust our approach. If you like a book we suggest, we can find more like it. If you don't like a book, let us know that too! We'll adjust our suggestions as we find out more about your preferences. We will maintain a copy of your form and our suggestions in confidential files to aid in future interactions unless you ask us not to. A follow-up form is available at <http://www.wrl.org/bookweb/RA/followupform.html> when you are ready for more recommendations.

You may contact us by phone (259-4050 or 259-7720), email (btrott@wrl.org), or in person at the Adult Services Reference desk at either library.

Your Suggestions

Based on the form submitted by: xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

You mention an interest in both SF and Fantasy, and in particular Jasper Fforde and Ray Bradbury. Here are some authors that you might enjoy who share traits with these two.

Connie Willis often combines elements of romance and humor while commenting on the foibles of contemporary society. In *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, Willis sets her story in the not too distant future, when time travel has become a reality. Her heroes, Ned Henry and Verity Kindie, must travel back into the Victorian period to correct a time incongruity that threatens the continued presence of the present. Willis's humor is more subdued than Jasper Fforde's but she shares with him a penchant for witty dialog, the ability to develop and maintain numerous plot lines, and a memorable cast of characters.

Tom Holt uses fairy tales and mythology as the starting point for his tales. Mixing fantasy, humor, and satire, his stories move quickly with lots of shifting between characters and locations. The novels are full of puns and other word-play, and Holt uses the fantastical settings to comment on elements of contemporary society. Try *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?*, where a group of Vikings come back to life in modern Scotland when an archaeologist disturbs their burial mound.

The Bear Went over the Mountain, by **William Kotzwinkle**, is a sardonic look at the publishing industry and the hype created at every level, Kotzwinkle creates a truly memorable character in this story. When Professor Arthur Bramhall buries a manuscript, he has no way of knowing a bear in search of food will dig it up. Smarter than the average bear, Hal decides to become human, and with the manuscript and a new suit, is on his way up the evolutionary ladder. Both funny and occasionally sad, the contrast between Hal's ascent and Bramhall's devolution

also offers plenty of food for thought. While not as uproarious as Fforde, Kotzwinkle's send up of literary pretentiousness is quite funny and on point.

Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series is a very funny extended satire of the modern world disguised as a rambling fantasy. Like Fforde, Pratchett's comic vision is grounded in word-play. He frequently parodies the elements of literary genres, including Police Procedurals, Fantasy, Science Fiction, and even musical theater. Mystery fans will enjoy the Chanderlesque settings and elements of police procedurals combined with political intrigue and humor in the Watch titles in the series. Start with *Guards! Guards!* to follow the development of the Ankh-Morpork City Watch under the guidance of Commander Vimes.

Like *Fahrenheit 451*, **Gary Shteyngart's** *Super Sad True Love Story* is a sometimes disturbing view of a dystopian future. Shteyngart writes about a doomed love affair between shlubby, aging Lenny, the son of Russian emigrants, and Eunice, a young, materialistic Korean-American twentysomething. Their romance is set against the background of a near future United States where the debt load to China is creating economic disaster, where matters like credit ratings and sexual attractions are part of a public record broadcast to handheld devices. In an apocalyptic scenario that is both darkly funny and at times just poignant, the love affair becomes a kind of symbol for the disintegration of the American dream.

Since you mention *To Kill a Mockingbird*, here are a couple of other writers of Southern fiction whose characters are hard to forget and whose writing style draws you into the story.

Readers who look for writing with a focus on characters and the nature of love should try **Reynolds Price**. Price writes compellingly of the ability of love to drive people apart as well as to bring them together. He is also a consummate storyteller, like many Southern novelists, and family is often at the center of Price's stories. Start with *The Surface of Earth*, in which Eva Kendall falls in love with her teacher and runs off with him, severing her ties to her family, and starting a chain of sorrow that pass through several generations. The story's twisting plot and wide range of characters will draw you in and keep your attention.

Silas House writes lovingly of the land, in this case, the coal regions of the Appalachians. Family and home are at the center of House's stories, with all of the sorrows and delights that they bring. Start with House's first novel *Clay's Quilt*, in which a young miner delves into the life of his mother, who was killed when he was four years old. As he traces her past, he comes to understand how families are tied together by their stories. At the same time, he's cultivating a relationship with a beautiful fiddler who is trying to escape her bad marriage. House writes lyrically of the changing seasons and the land, and is a fine storyteller as well.

Although taking place in the Hasidic community of New York City rather than the small town South, another novel with a powerful young narrator is **Chaim Potok's** *My Name is Asher Lev*. What happens when a Jewish boy discovers a deep artistic gift that his religion forbids him to explore? Young Asher Lev has an innate talent for drawing and painting, but in the Hasidic community in which he lives, such arts are viewed as a waste of time that could be spent on religious pursuits. Lev's passion to be an artist creates conflict with and between his parents, and raises questions of the role of the individual in a community. Potok has written a

compelling book about pursuing talents, the relationship between parent and child, and the role of art in society.

Jim Butcher's fantasy/mystery novels are an excellent example of genre blending. Here are some other titles that you might enjoy for their mix of styles, memorable characters, and occasional humor.

In **Kim Harrison's** series, starting with *Dead Witch Walking*, Inderland Security runner Rachel Morgan is a witch. She's tired of low-skill jobs, so she quits I.S. and starts her own detective agency. That might have worked, but two other I.S. agents leave the same day, and her ticked-off boss puts a bounty on her head. With the help of the pixies in the garden, her vampire roommate and the witch across the street, Rachel just might live long enough to bust a charismatic councilman for running drugs. Good plotting, strong female character, and magical creatures offer a variety of appeals.

Charlaine Harris' *Grave Sight* is a good mix of paranormal and mystery. Harper Connelly has a gift for finding dead people and seeing how they died. She and her stepbrother travel the country selling her services to provide closure to families who have lost loved ones. When they come to a small town in Arkansas, they find that someone will go to great lengths to stop them from finding out what happened to a local teenager.

Finally, you mention an interest in thoughtful nonfiction titles that give you insight into our lives. Here are a few authors to try.

Oliver Sacks is one of the finest writers on the workings of the human mind. In *Musicophilia*, Sacks continues his practice of using individual cases to explore broader questions. In this instance, all of his examples are drawn from the world of music. Here, Sacks looks at "earworms," those bits of song that get stuck in your head and that you can't seem to get rid of, at the case of a doctor who was struck by lightning which sparked a career in composition, at musical hallucinations that are frighteningly real, and at the concept of perfect pitch. Along with these studies and discussions, Sacks includes pieces about his own interactions with music as a player and as a physician. *Musicophilia* is Sacks at his best, a delightful, witty, and above all thoughtful blend of science, memoir, and anecdote. If you are a musician or just love music of any sort you will find much to enjoy here.

Tracy Kidder is a master of narrative nonfiction, telling true stories that draw the reader in and are hard to put down. *Among Schoolchildren* tells the story of Christine Zajac, who teaches in the Mount Holyoke School District in Massachusetts. Her school is racially mixed and its location in a declining New England mill town adds to the challenges that face Zajac throughout the year. Kidder does a superb job of capturing life in the classroom, both the triumphs and the defeats, in clear unsentimental prose .

In **Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down***, little Lia Lee's epilepsy provokes very different reactions in her immigrant Hmong parents and the American medical and social system which they encounter. The author provides a deeply insightful book about how different cultures approach medical and social problems.

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From The Seattle Public Library Your Next Five Reads program:

Sample of a filled out form (with identification removed):

Patron:

<Are you interested in books for Adults, Teens, or Children?>

All, from YA to adult

<Do you have a preferred format (Book, Book on CD, eBook, eAudio, or Large Print - list all that apply>

nope - any format is great.

< Tell our librarians about a few books and/or authors you've enjoyed, and what you liked about them. Also feel free to tell us about books you haven't liked, and why. What are you in the mood to read next? (2500 characters or less)>

That is my wife's library card number, as we coordinate all the overdue notices in one account. I'm looking for a few lighter books for the summer.

I like Italo Calvino, Borges, Haruki Murakami, Umberto Eco, and other intelligent writers who are able to blend reality, surrealism, and thoughtfulness.

I read Where'd You Go, Bernadette and thought the writing had a light quirkiness to it, but the author did not really tie the motifs together and ended it horribly. So much more could have been done with it.

Recent books I have really liked include:

- Roberto Bolano, Savage Detectives
- Jeffrey Eugenides, Middlesex (I did not like the Marriage Plot nearly as much)
- Phillip K Dick, Short Stories
- Gary Shteyngart, Super Sad True Love Story - he nails observations about humanity and where things seem to be headed while letting us look at ourselves.
- China Mieville, The City and The City. I loved the modernity of this book combined with its exotic/normal setting.
- Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go - haunting and grounded
- Neil Gaiman - lots of his.
- Keret and Cortazar are two authors who have been recommended to me.

Thanks a ton!

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The response sent by a librarian at SPL:

Librarian:

Hello, _____

My name is _____ and I'm a librarian with The Seattle Public Library's reader services department. Thanks for using Your Next Five Books, our online service for readers. I've created a list for you right in our library catalog, which you can find right here:

<http://bit.ly/10SUamJ>

I've tried to stick to rather lighter books, as you mention, but also authors who are playful and inventive, like many of your favorites.

My first suggestion is "Angelmaker," the second novel by Nick Harkaway - a really fun mixed-genre piece of escapist fiction - (coming-of-age gangster SF comic thriller etc etc) but kind of stunningly smart and witty. Harkaway is the son of the great spy novelist John Le Carre; his first title, "The Gone-Away World," is also good, though he seems to have been just warming up for this tour-de-force. Should top the MENSA beach reads list.

Another one that is fairly offbeat and I think/hope earns its quirkiness for you more than the Semple is Kevin Wilson's "The Family Fang." Though this has its serious side, it is also quite funny in a sort of Wes Anderson sort of way - it is the story of two performance artists and their children. (For a similar blend of quirky and serious, you might check out Christopher Boucher's "How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive," or Charles Yu's "How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe.")

Next I'm suggesting George Saunders' latest collection of stories, "The Tenth of December." Something about your reference to Shteyngart nailing "observations about humanity and where things seem to be headed" makes me think you'll enjoy Saunders, who is disconcerting, hilarious, and wonderful. This latest collection has a waiting list, but his earlier ones are good too; while you're waiting you might also check out similar stories by Jack Pendarvis, Judy Budnitz, Trinie Dalton or Ben Loory (and as you say, Etgar Keret) - all artists of the ridiculous and sublime.

Next a title that is just flat out funny: Jess Walter's "The Financial Lives of the Poets." Great human comedy about a loser, losing, hard. Walter is an immensely likeable writer. (If you like this, you might also enjoy Sam Lipsyte's bilious & hilarious "The Ask").

And what is a list of lighter reads without at least one post-apocalyptic story? Peter Heller's "The Dog Stars" has finally started to show up on library shelves, and is really pretty impressive, moving, and original. (If that sounds like an unforgivable thing to include on a list of supposedly lighter fiction, let me swap it out for Kyril Bonifiglio's wonderfully droll crime trilogy, "Don't Point That Thing at Me," "Something Nasty in the Woodshed," and "After You With the Pistol." Pure pleasures of the guiltiest kind.)

I hope we've struck your fancy with at least some of these: let us know, and Happy Reading!

(name)
Reader Services Department
The Seattle Public Library

Thank you for using Your Next Five Books. Please feel encouraged to reply to this message letting me know what you think about these suggestions (whether they appeal to you or not), and about this service. If you send us a fresh request you may want to include the link to your prior list to help the librarian who works with you see what has already been suggested.

“I ransack public libraries, and find them full of sunk treasure.” - Virginia Woolf.

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Below is part of the exchange that followed between the patron and librarian once the initial set of suggestions was sent.

Patron:
(librarian name),

I am a law librarian at the UW. I love the profession.

Your response was truly awesome and made me even prouder to be one.

That was truly rockstar service and dead on.

How did you know I had just finished *In Persuasion Nation* and have *Beautiful Ruins* on my stack partially read??

Guess what my wife just finished? *The Financial Lives of Poets*.

I know times are tough at libraries. Is there a way I can donate to show my appreciation for this service/your response?

Librarian:

Hello, _____, & Salut, fellow librarian! We probably know some of the same people. _____ was pretty instrumental in getting me into this line of work; we used to work together for the Feds.

Are you a fan of Paul Auster at all? Not everyone likes his stuff - I was getting a little done with it myself some years back, but he's come back lately with some very strong works. I might suggest any of his last three or four - and then if you like those, perhaps some of the titles here would please. Worth a browse, anyway:

<http://bit.ly/10jrJgz>

Also, just maybe, The Man Who Was Thursday - see if it sounds good to you:

<http://bit.ly/10jrPES>

Thank you so much for the kudo - it was most gratifying, and we'd love to have you and your wife coming back for more, whenever we can help.

In response to your question about donations, there two main avenues for supporting the library - the Friends of the Library, and the Library Foundation. Here's a webpage that links to both of them: <http://bit.ly/10jrcLx>

If you do make a donation, do feel free to let them know what inspired it: demonstrating the value of what we do to our fundraisers always helps us keep on doing it.

All the best! Enjoy the rain this week, and the guilt-free reading it allows.

<name>

Reader Services Department
Seattle Public Library

(Patron has since written back a couple of times for fresh suggestions)

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Resources selected by Megan McArdle, Berkeley Public Library