At Leisure

Read-alikes

with Joyce Saricks

Not a week goes by without someone posting a query on the RA e-mail list Fiction_L asking for read-alikes, prompted usually by a patron asking for more authors "just like" a favorite. Of course, Fiction_L is a great venue for these questions, because the best read-alikes come from brainstorming what it is that readers like about an author and who else shares those qualities. Because we all appreciate different aspects of an author's style, we can offer a wide variety of directions for interested readers to pursue to keep them happily reading for months.

It used to be that librarians posting this query would simply say, "My patron loves Lee Child. Please give me some similar authors." Almost no one gets away with that these days. Within minutes, someone will demand, "What does your reader like about Lee Child?" Armed with more useful information, we quickly offer suggestions.

Researching read-alikes draws on both the most basic and the most advanced RA skills. Making connections among books and authors is one of the first skills we master as readers' advisors. Researching read-alikes builds on that ability, and as our knowledge of books and authors grows, it allows us to see beyond genre and beyond fiction and nonfiction. What makes this process so difficult is that it requires a reading background to draw on as well as skill at identifying appeal and making those connections for readers.

Before I go any further, perhaps I should identify what I mean by a read-alike. It is a match of author or specific title based on appeal, not genre. Thus, not every cozy-mystery author is a read-alike for every other. Discovering read-alikes requires us to identify what readers appreciate about an author; then we can suggest others who share those characteristics. It's not easy. And, of course, the real answer to the question, "Who else writes just like my favorite author?" is "No one." No other author will provide exactly the same satisfaction. Even those who closely imitate a popular author's work fall short. Fortunately, our job is not to find an exact match; it's only to identify other authors who play in the same ballpark—authors to keep fans happily reading until their favorites write more and, sometimes, authors to take them in unexpected directions.

So how do we approach the read-alike question with readers standing before us at the desk? We treat this like any other readers'-advisory interview: we ask them to tell us what they enjoy about this author. How do they describe the author? What do they talk about first? Is it pacing or a particular type of character? A familiar story line or a tone that pervades the story? We listen and take note of the appeal elements they will naturally use in their descriptions. We might verify that it sounds as if they're looking for another book that keeps them turning pages or that pulls them in with the evocative tone. Or they may like a particular character type—the loner that Lee Child has perfected in his Jack Reacher novels, for example.

Sometimes we'll be able to offer suggestions right away, but even then, we should ask if we can get back to them with additional authors. This gives us a chance to research. I like to read something about the author and his writing—even if I have read his books—to see how others describe him. I read reviews, because the best ones offer suggestions of similar authors, as the *Booklist* reviews often do.

Then I make a list of the author's appeal characteristics—the pacing, characterizations, story line, setting/frame, mood/tone, and language/style. If pacing is the key to an author's appeal for a reader, I can focus on that. When I'm stuck, I try to decide what the author does best and build on that knowledge.

This is also the time to share this challenge with others. When we first created these lists at the Downers Grove Public Library, we'd leave our notes at the desk, so everyone could add to the appeal characteristics and suggest authors who might work—and why. Any suggestion that clearly links the appeal of one author to another can be valid and might please the reader, but articulating why an author might work is vital.

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Published lists of read-alikes can also be helpful, and the best are those that say what they're matching. These are good for brainstorming too. They might suggest an author I hadn't thought of or send me off in a new, profitable direction.

When we offer suggestions to readers, we should always identify what we're matching. A title may offer that elaborate historical detail that they liked in their favorite author's books, or a suggested author creates that disturbing sense of menace they seek. This strategy is useful because it reminds readers of what they said they were looking for, while it requires that we think about what we're doing. We're not simply offering them any book; we're suggesting one that has the elements they enjoy.

Understanding how to create read-alikes for fiction and nonfiction is another useful skill for all readers' advisors. Through this process, we learn to look beyond subject and genre to make connections among authors; we force ourselves to think clearly about what makes an author popular with readers; we see how authors fit within a genre—and so understand the appeal of the genre better—but we also learn to go outside the genre in making suggestions. We refine our readers'-advisory interviewing skills as we listen for those adjectives that define an author's appeal, and we learn to brainstorm to identify additional authors. Tangible results may be read-alike lists, available in our libraries and on our web pages, but the intangible results include a heightened sensitivity to what readers enjoy. Researching authors to discover read-alikes can be some of the most interesting and intellectually challenging work we do, not to mention immensely satisfying and truly enjoyable!

Joyce Saricks is the author of Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library *(ALA Editions, 2005).*