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Taking Gender Out of Reader's Advisory

One day, a patron I had become friendly with asked me for a book for her son. He had just finished the *Percy Jackson* series, she said, and was looking for something equally exciting.

The first series that came to mind was *The Sisters Grimm*, an amazing series about two girls who fight crime in a town populated by fairy tale characters. When I explained this to the mother, she grimaced.

"I don't know . . . you said it's about girls. He's a boy. Do you really think he'd go for that?"

My yes was firm. I asked her to trust me, and off she went with the first volume in hand.

About a week later, her son came into the section excited as could be. "Kyle! Where's the next *Sisters Grimm* book? It's so good!" I didn't gloat to the mother, but I wanted to—especially when, a few weeks later, he told me it was the best series he had ever read.

In my experience, when patrons ask for books for youth, they typically provide two pieces of information: the young person's age and gender. Sometimes, patrons assume this is all you need to know in order to provide an accurate recommendation. Even if they qualify this information with "He's an advanced reader," for example, or "She's extremely girly," gender is seen as a sort of shorthand, an easy way to broadly determine a kid's interests. All too often, these descriptors limit what books are given to youth instead of expanding upon a topic of expressed interest.

It is generally assumed that girls will read about anybody, but boys will only read about boys. I have found this assumption present in readers' advisory encounters, in textbooks, behind the circulation desk, and in the classroom. My teen services professor said, with conviction, "You just won't be able to get boys to read girl books." I raised my hand and disagreed strongly, based on my years of getting boys to read and enjoy all different kinds of books—while he was glad that was my experience, he said, it wasn't a common one. Hence, the cross-gender popularity of *Percy Jackson* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and the gender segregated readership of *The Sisters Grimm* and the *Dork Diaries*. Not only does this assumption imply that stories about girls are less interesting, it also reinforces the idea that girls must be able to function in a male-dominated world but not vice-versa. I believe that librarians, as readers' advisors, are in an ideal position to combat, rather than perpetuate, such outcroppings of misogyny. Furthermore, as information professionals, we are able to access a wide range of materials for our patrons, and can suggest literature about which they may not otherwise have been aware. This is a tremendous responsibility, which can have a significant impact on a person's reading habits and choices.

I recognize this is controversial, but I believe that there is no such thing as "girl books" and "boy books," despite the crushing weight of every library professional, bookstore employee, parent,

and author who has tried to convince me otherwise. I'll never forget the day I held a copy of **Ella Enchanted** behind my back and book-talked it to a fifth-grade boy. When I was done he said he wanted to read it. I made him promise that he would give it a try even after seeing the cover and, sure enough, he walked out of the door with the sparkly pink book in hand. Unfortunately, I don't have any "tricks" or "tactics" I can recommend for librarians who want similar results. All I do is approach patrons with enthusiasm and excitement, and hope to connect with them that way.

Of course, I must admit that my position as a younger male librarian puts me in a unique position when working with patrons. In a stark display of gender-based discrimination, I have observed people taking my recommendations more seriously than those of my female colleagues. Patrons are charmed when I tell them that I loved "girl books" as a young reader, and historically have been more likely to excitedly take my suggestions—something about a young man who loved Tamora Pierce and Patricia Wrede charms parents, and convinces boys to give them a shot. You might expect that parents of girls and the girls themselves might be reluctant to take my advice, since they might not expect me to be able to empathize with younger female readers, but so far that has not been my experience. While this article cannot address the larger impact of gender imbalance in the library field (especially in youth librarianship), my experience

indicates that male librarians are in a powerful position to utilize their male privilege toward the goal of gender equity.

While it might seem like the path of least resistance, using gender as a shortcut for reader's advisory is problematic on several levels. For example, youth asking for themselves rarely state their gender identity—it is often assumed that you can deduce a person's gender just by looking at them. Queer, transgender, gender non-conforming, and questioning youth, however, do not necessarily fall into the pre-set categories with which librarians are trained to work. Providing recommendations that do not take into account gender diversity only marginalizes an already underserved population. Librarians who are sensitive to gender diversity can be strong advocates and allies for youth who might have trouble finding sympathetic peers or adults.

Furthermore, dividing books into gender-based categories just reinforces harmful stereotypes of the supposed innate differences between boys and girls. One out of every three girls plays extracurricular sports in this country, but sports books are a male-dominated genre (Parker-Pope, 2010). Girls and boys both need role models in literature that provide examples of a wide and diverse range of identities and experiences, and while *The Hunger Games* are indisputably wonderful, how many other books with female leads have gotten as much readership among boys *and* girls? I have heard that boys will only read books that are action-packed and have a minimum of emotion, but this seems like a self-fulfilling prophecy. If these are the only books that are marketed, recommended, and deemed appropriate for boys, these are the only books they will read. I have found that a positive endorsement of just about any title will entice boys to read so-called "girl books"—all they want is the reassurance that reading about girls is not going to hurt them somehow. I am not advocating that every young man has to read *Gossip Girl*, or that girls must check out the latest *Young James Bond* (though certainly nothing is wrong with either scenario); however, I am in favor of librarians seeing their younger patrons as individuals with full emotional ranges and an infinite potential of interests, rather than boxing them into pre-determined categories.

Recommending books without taking gender barriers into account is far more challenging than it seems. Parents and teens themselves may prove resistant to cross those lines. After all, gender conditioning starts from birth—I once saw a father stop his baby boy from crawling towards a display of purple books saying, "Those are for girls." Nine out of ten self-identified GLBTQ teenagers report bullying or harassment in schools, highlighting the punishments in store for those who dare to transgress these norms. We, as librarians, also need to be aware of our own gender-based stereotypes, and work to unpack them. Of course, this is life-long work, much in the same way that unlearning racism, ableism, and other "isms" takes constant vigilance. The reward is helping patrons on an individual level and contributing to a better world.

In the classic librarian film *The Desk Set*, Spencer Tracy asks Katharine Hepburn, "Now what is the first thing you notice in a person?" She answers with "Whether the person is male or female."

Is this the first thing a librarian notices about a patron? In an ideal world, librarians would view each person to approach the desk as an individual, making no guesses about their mood or interests, but rare would be the readers' advisor who would even think to suggest a romance novel to a grizzled old man. Whether or not we are conscious of it, and whether or not our assumptions prove accurate, a person's gender presentation affects the way we treat them. This has profound implications for readers' advisory services, and actively questioning and critiquing gender-based assumptions can radically transform the way librarians provide these services to young people. Gender is a real and important factor in a young person's life and identity. Rather than limiting a field of interest, it can provide a jumping-off point to learn about oneself, as well as empathizing with others. Even more than boys reading about girls and vice-versa, going beyond the concept of "boy books" and "girl books" can open readers up to a wide range of experiences that transcend gender identity and assignment. ■

RESOURCES

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