

Taking the Guess Work Out of Nonfiction Readers' Advisory:

What's It All About Seabiscuit?

compiled by

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[PowerPoint Presentation](#) (in .pdf format)

Conference Abstract: Non-fiction readers' advisory is the new buzz word. Recommended tools, best practices, sure-bet authors, genres, and subject areas will be showcased. Participants will have the opportunity to share insights and experiences.

We can all feel lost when it comes to Readers' Advisory. I once heard someone say, "I don't know anything about mysteries, except some have cats in them and some of them don't." Now, to make it even more difficult, nonfiction has been added to the mix. But I would argue that readers' advisory is actually easier when adding nonfiction to the process. First of all, there are more possibilities to choose from when helping your customers. In addition, you are more likely to please a customer that reads only nonfiction or both nonfiction and fiction. Finally, some staff only read nonfiction, so you will have more staff who will happily participate.

Almost a year ago, I started including nonfiction as one of the genres in our two year readers' advisory training class at Memphis Public Library & Information Center . One of the books that made us all aware of how popular nonfiction can be was *Seabiscuit*. Keep this book in mind as we look at nonfiction readers' advisory.

What do we mean by non-fiction readers' advisory? First, we need to specify that nonfiction readers' advisory is not simply providing a reference book. We are not talking about a purely factual book. It is not a math or diet book. It is not a cookbook, unless there are many personal stories included, such as Pat Conroy or Maya Angelou's recent cookbooks. Rather, it is a factual story intended for pleasure reading and written in a narrative style.

With new addition to an information service, there are always some problems. Lack of familiarity is certainly one of the problems when you tackle nonfiction reader's advisory. There have not been many tools to support it, either. However, that is changing because now there are two books written about nonfiction readers' advisory. Robert Burgin's collection of essays titled *Nonfiction Reader's Advisory* was the only book on nonfiction readers' advisory available for some time. Just recently, he has written another book with Sarah Statz Cords, *The Real Story*. This book defines the genre and discusses its unique characteristics and appeals, as well as describing more than 500 popular nonfiction titles, organized according to genre. In addition, the book also includes "read alike," books which have similar appeal characteristics, such as a similar storyline, setting, atmosphere, tone, pacing and/or characterization, and therefore is a good way to direct a reader from one book they like to another that might also be of interest.

Since that there are only two books on nonfiction readers' advisory, here are some other useful suggestions:

- Make a list of "Sure Bets" appropriate for your library and customers. The Memphis Public Library staff created the list [below](#); it should help you get started.
- Look at *Booklist's* nonfiction "Read-alike" columns and "Top-10" lists.
- Amazon.com's subject connections can sometimes be useful.
- Checking book trucks for what is popular is always a good method for any readers' advisory question.
- Use some of the same tools that you use for fiction readers' advisory:
 - Websites and listservs, such as Fiction_L archives <http://www.weblibrary.org/rs/FLarchive.html>
 - Publishing house book discussion guides
 - Reading Group Choices and Reading Group Guides
 - <http://www.readinggroupchoices.com>
 - <http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

- Audiobook catalogs (good descriptions and choices)

The basics of the readers' advisory interview are the same, regardless of whether you are working with fiction or nonfiction. Begin by asking the reader to tell you about a book they enjoyed and why they enjoyed it. Use the same appeal characteristics: pacing and storyline (humor books often have short chapters and brief storylines), characterization (biographies have strong characterization), and frame (histories have strong settings). Even connecting books to movie tie-ins are the same. And don't forget that nonfiction also has genres, such as biography, travel, true adventure, etc.

Match the reader's fiction interests with nonfiction genres. If a customer loves mysteries, they might like true crime. Horror readers may like books written on forensics, plagues or the occult. Character-centered fiction readers might like award-winning biographies or memoirs. Look at award lists such as the nonfiction National Book Award for suggestions.

Don't forget to market your materials. Include both fiction and nonfiction in displays -- don't separate the two in your mind or the public's.

Let's do a little reality check: Look at the bestsellers list and note how many books are narrative style nonfiction. Sometimes the line between fiction and nonfiction is blurred. Take Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, for instance. Many people thought *Memoirs of a Geisha* was nonfiction. Do I need to mention *A Million Little Pieces*? There are so many choices. Here are just a few very popular narrative nonfiction books:

- *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*
- *The Devil in the White City*
- *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series*
- *Einstein's Dream*
- *Guns of August*
- *Helter Skelter*
- *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*
- *Isaac's Storm*
- *Mornings on Horseback*
- *Perfect Storm*
- *1776*
- *Tuesdays With Morrie*
- *Under the Tuscan Sun*

- *Walk in the Woods*
- *Year in Provence*

Let's go back to our example of *Seabiscuit*. Looking at *Seabiscuit's* appeal characteristics, we quickly perceive strong characterization with a storyline of “winning over great odds.” A possible read alike could be Sandra Day O'Connor's *Lazy B: Growing Up on a Cattle Ranch in the American Southwest*. If the customer is drawn to this book's time period, the Great Depression, then they might like *Cinderella Man*. There are countless other sports books that concern “winning over great odds,” but with the East versus the West coast racing heritage in *Seabiscuit*, maybe a book on the United States hockey team win over Russia in the Olympics might be successful suggestion.

If you went to the 2006 Public Library Association Conference, you may have heard Nancy Pearl and several others present a program on “creating a map.” Taking the subject of Paris , they started their map with children's books, *The Red Balloon* and *Madeline*, moved to David Sedaris' books, mentioned *Paris to the Moon* and Rick Steves' travel books, threw in the movie *Chocolate*, and emphasized adding music such as Edith Piaf, which led to Julia Child's cookbooks. You can create your own maps based on themes or appeal characteristics or similar storylines. The possibilities are endless.

Always remember that readers' advisory is not an exact science. Keep suggesting many books to your customers knowing that one book will connect with their life in some magical way. When you connect the right book with the right customer, it will be electric.

SURE BET NARRATIVE NONFICTION SUGGESTIONS

Compiled by Robert Cruthirds, Jason Ezell and John Lloyd
Memphis Public Library & Information Center
For *Taking the Guess Work Out of Nonfiction Readers' Advisory: Or What's*

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TLA 2006 Conference

HISTORY

The First World War, John Keegan (0375400524)

From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, Jacques Barzun (0060175869)

The Americans: The Colonial Experience, Daniel Boorstin
(0394705130)

The first volume of a trilogy, this is a very readable and accurate rendition of early American history, from the Massachusetts colonies to the Revolutionary War. Boorstin compares and contrasts the experiences of colonists in Virginia , Georgia , Massachusetts , and Pennsylvania . His observations of the Quakers in Pennsylvania are particularly enlightening and at times entertaining.

Due South: Dispatches from Down Home, R. Scott Brunner
(0375502556)

A collection of essays that reflect Brunner's love, admiration, and knowledge of Southern culture and traditions. From "How to Rear a Southerner," to "The Fishing Trip," the reader is exposed to a marvelous blend of wit, wisdom, and humor.

BIOGRAPHY

John Adams, David G. McCullough (0684813637)

The Path to Power (The Years of Lyndon Johnson, vol. 1), Robert A. Caro (0679729453)

Last Train to Memphis : The Rise of Elvis Presley, Peter Guralnick
(0316332259)

This is volume one of a definitive two-volume biography of Elvis that covers the first 25 years of his life. Guralnick researched his topic well, beginning with Elvis's humble beginnings in Tupelo , and ending (in this volume) with

his induction into the Army. Guralnick also explores the social and historical context that provided the background to this remarkable story. The unique convergence of musical genres in Memphis is a major part of the book.

Riding Rockets: The Outrageous Tales of a Space Shuttle Astronaut,
Mike Mullane (0743276825)

Mullane volunteered for the shuttle program in 1978 after serving as a combat pilot in the Vietnam War. He soon found himself at odds with NASA's corporate culture, and the book is an engaging expose of Mullane's triumphs and misadventures within that culture. A candid, no-holds-barred account of what's wrong (and right) with America's space program.

TRAVEL

In a Sunburned Country, **Bill Bryson** (0767903854)

To the Ends of the Earth, **Paul Theroux** (0679402462)

Japanland: A Year in Search of Wa, **Karin Muller** (1594862230)

Muller left the United States for a year to live with a Japanese family in a Tokyo suburb and to experience *wa*, or spiritual harmony. She eventually parts ways with her host family to explore the nooks and crannies of rural Japan. This is an engaging and lively account of Muller's attempt to understand a very modern society that still clings to the traditions and rituals of an insular past.

Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World, **Rita Golden Gelman** (0609809547)

Since leaving her California home in 1986, Gelman has traveled the world in search of adventure and self-discovery. This is the story of her wanderings from Mexico to Indonesia, and the joy and excitement she experiences with the people of various lands. Gelman travels alone without a plan or itinerary, encountering many unexpected challenges along the way.

TRUE ADVENTURE

Into the Wild, **Jon Krakauer** (0385486804)

***The Story of the Titanic as Told by Its Survivors*, Jack Winocour
(0486206106)**

***Left for Dead: My Journey Home from Everest*, Beck Weathers
(0440237084)**

During a disastrous storm on top of Mount Everest in May 1996, Beck Weathers was abandoned by his fellow climbers when he became lost in a blizzard. Somehow, he eventually staggered back to camp, and began a long, slow process of recovery from severe frostbite. A wealthy doctor from Dallas who had an obsession with climbing, Weathers chronicles not only the physical struggles he faced, but the emotional toll that his obsession had taken on his family.

***Tales from the Edge: True Adventures in Alaska*, Larry Kaniut
(0312317034)**

This is an edited volume featuring the writing of Peter Jenkins, Jay Hammond (former governor of Alaska), Dana Stabenow, Kaniut himself, and others. The beauty, wonder, and mystery of Alaska is explored in 25 essays with topics including fishing, flying, and conservation. Hammond includes some honest observations about his tenure as governor from 1974 to 1982.

THE CELEBRITY LIFE

***An Affair to Remember: The Remarkable Love Story of Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy* Christopher Andersen (0688153119)**

***Tab Hunter: Confidential, The Making of a Movie Star*, Tab Hunter with Eddie Muller (1565124669)**

***Dean & Me (A Love Story)*, Jerry Lewis and James Kaplan
(0767920864)**

Jerry Lewis creates a good portrait of the somewhat unlikely but captivating team he and Dean Martin made, shedding light on Martin's work and public figure while also telling a bittersweet personal history.

***Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke*, Peter Guralnick
(0316377945)**

The accomplished music biographer paints a complex portrait of a musical legend who moved from gospel music to pop with great business sense and ultimate success before meeting a tragic early end. Guralnick shows special strength in his characterizations of the music and particular performances as well as for its depictions of the gospel music scene.

ESSAY COLLECTIONS

***How to be Alone: Essays*, Jonathan Franzen (0374173273)**

***Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now*, Maya Angelou (0679427430)**

***The Devil Never Sleeps and Other Essays*, Andrei Codrescu (0312202946)**

NPR commentator, writer and professor Codrescu risks scandal again by uncovering the devil in a contemporary context. In a series of socially critical essays, the author finds today's evil not in the portraits of the traditional myths but in the world of the “opportunistic technocrat” and in our wrestling with the banal.

***Small Wonder*, Barbara Kingsolver (0060504072)**

After being contracted to write a piece in response to 9/11, Kingsolver admittedly cannot quit writing relevant essays and so decided to group them as this collection. The stories emphasize the importance of the simple, the personal, and the overlooked even in relation to overwhelming world political problems. Kingsolver brings her distinctive and brave perspective to bear, often through the lens of her concerns with science, literature, and home.

HUMOR

***Running with Scissors*, Augusten Burroughs (0312283709)**

***When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* George Carlin (1401301347)**

***Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*, David Sedaris (0316143464)**

The author writes about his family and personal experiences with a perfectly timed humor and quirky attention. Most of the stories focus on his youth in North Carolina, but some are set in New York and his current home in France. All draw laughter from a fine attention to status and convention among the American middle class.

***Everybody Into the Pool, Beth Lisick* (0060778776)**

Lisick, a suburban, middle-class former homecoming queen seeks exposure with any number of subcultures, drawing out the humor in both her own and these various very other experiences she has. These experiences are recounted with a hip satirical wit that is both entertaining and insightful.

THE JOURNALIST'S STORY

***All Over but the Shoutin', Rick Bragg* (0679442588)**

***Personal History, Katharine Graham* (0394585852)**

***An American Story, Debra J. Dickerson* (037542069x)**

Dickerson tells the story of her rise to success as a journalist, focusing on the particular difficulties she faced, though, as the daughter of African-American sharecroppers. A complicated portrait of success is presented by an unflinching self-analysis, always mindful of the influences of class, gender, and race.

***The Tender Bar: A Memoir, J. R. Moehringer* (1401300642)**

Moehringer talks about his being raised by a single mother and only knowing his absent father – a disc jockey – as a “voice”. The story then centers on how Moehringer turns to a local pub to find male role models and finds a set of surrogate fathers in the patrons, eventually using that influence to become a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist.

SPIRITUAL WISDOM

***How To Know God: The Soul's Journey into the Mystery of Mysteries, Deepak Chopra* (0609600788)**

***The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*, Rick Warren
(0310205719)**

***The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, Don Miguel Ruiz (1878424505)**

Promoted by Oprah, this book sees a modern author with knowledge of the Toltec shamanic spiritual tradition focus and elaborate on four principles that should help keep us from limiting our own potential for personal freedom.

***Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh (1573220183)**

Not surprisingly, Thich Nhat Hahn – a man admired for his work for peace by Martin Luther King, Jr. – here works to dissolve perceived antagonisms between Jesus and Buddha, Buddhism and Christianity. He works to find a similar spirit at their core and relays these concepts in a very thoughtful but simple style.

ANIMALS AND PETS

***Clara the Early Years: The Story of the Pug Who Ruled My Life*, Margo Kaufman (0452281369)**

***Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World's Worst Dog*, John Grogan (0060817089)**

***Animal ER: Extraordinary Stories of Hope and Healing from One of the World's Leading Veterinary Hospitals*, Vickie Croke (0452281016)**

Truly fascinating stories from the state of the art emergency room at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine.

***A Dog Year: Twelve Months, Four Dogs, and Me*, Jon Katz
(0812966902)**

The life of the author with his four dogs, with very different personalities, is described with many interesting and engaging anecdotes.

BUSINESS

Geeks: How Two Lost Boys Rode the Internet Out of Idaho , Jon Katz
(037550298X)

Skunk Works, Ben R Rich, (0316743003 pbk) (0316743305)

Soap Opera: The Inside Story of Procter & Gamble, Alecia Swasy,
(0812920600)

The Google Story, David A. Vise and Mark Malseed (055380457X)

The phenomena of the one true dot com success story. This book also delves into the human side of this ever-expanding company.

Shameless Exploitation: In Pursuit of the Common Good, Paul Newman, and A.E. Hotchner (0385508026)

The story of “Newman's Own” a multimillion dollar business that bypassed all normal marketing strategy and became a huge success. They also donate all profits to charity.

COOKERY

Dining by Rail The History and the Recipes of America's Golden Age of Railroad Cuisine, James D. Porterfield (0312187114)

Last Dinner on the Titanic, Rick Archbold and Dana McCauley
(078686303X)

Serious Pig: An American Cook in Search of His Roots, John Thorne and Matt Lewis Thorne (0865475970)

Choice Cuts: A Savory Selection of Food Writing from Around the World and Throughout History, Mark Kurlansky (0345457102)

A mix of culinary tales all with one thread in common, food. Stories include eating, preparing and serving and you can select from the menu of choice to read light or to indulge in the full course of material.

The Life and Cuisine of Elvis Presley , David Adler (0517880245)

Not an ordinary biography this book describes the favorite foods and diet of the King of Rock and Roll from his childhood till his death (and beyond?).

HEALTH RELATED NONFICTION

***The Hot Zone*, Richard Preston (0679430946)**

***Virus Hunter: Thirty Years of Battling Hot Viruses Around the World*, C.J. Peters and Mark Olshaker (0385485581 pbk.) (0385485573 alk. paper)**

***The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream*, Samson Davis, George Jenkins, and Remeck Hunt ; with Lisa Frazier Page (157322216X)**

The story of three young African American boys who decided to make a pact and become doctors in order to escape a dead end life in the projects.

***Smashed : Story of a Drunken Girlhood*, Koren Azilckas (0670033766)**

A cautionary true life tale of one young woman's experience with alcohol from junior high through her college years and how it affected her life.

LAW

***A Civil Action*, Jonathan Harr (1572480173)**

***Class Action: The Story of Lois Jenson and the Landmark Case That Changed Sexual Harassment Law*, Clara Bingham and Laura Leedy Gansler (0385496133)**

***The Deacons "for Defense and Justice": Defenders of the African American Community in Bogalusa , Louisiana During the 1960's* , L. LaSimba M. Gray (1885066732)**

The deacons of this small Louisiana church decided to defend the rights of African Americans. Since most of the members were ex-military that meant firearms were not out of the question.

***Legal Beagle: Diary of a Canine Counselor*, Linda A. Cawley (0882821466)**

Tells the tales of the unconventional career of a “Dog Lawyer” and the interesting cases she has dealt with in the court systems that view pets unsympathetically as property.

SCIENCE

***Who's Afraid of Schreodinger's Cat?* I.N. Marshall (0688118658)**

***Yes, We Have No Neutrons: An Eye-Opening Tour Through the Twists and Turns of Bad Science,* A.K. Dewdney (0471295868)**

***The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing and the Invention of the Computer,* David Leavitt (0-393-5236-2)**

He committed suicide in 1954, but his discoveries led to the breaking of the German's enigma code in WWII and eventually led to the invention of the computer.

***Universal Foam: from Cappuccino to the Cosmos,* Sidney Perkowitz (0802713572)**

The author explains the cosmos using simple everyday examples like the foam found in Cappuccino in a very engaging way.