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<center>Visual Search Aids for Reader's Advisory</center>

Reader's Advisory is nothing new for librarians. Helping patrons discover new books, authors, and genres has always been a mainstay of the public library. However, with the advent of the internet, the way patrons search is changing. Many times, reading selections are made while surfing the library website. As noted by Rachel Van Riel in an article published in VINE, "Many public library websites are like traditional library collections – full of riches for those who know what's there and will take the time to look but ignored by the majority of people who walk past" (Van Riel 138). This calls attention to the need for libraries and librarians to offer reader's advisory services online, as well as in person. Many libraries are familiar with and subscribe to NoveList, which is a readers advisory subscription service that can be integrated with the online library catalog to provide users with on the spot suggestions for similar authors or titles. I would like to highlight a few of the lesser-known resources, that offer a more dynamic interface. Literature-Map, Books & Authors, and Whichbook are great resources that offer users a visual search feature. The visual search offers a more contemporary feel, and makes the experience more interactive, but is not without its limitations. In the next few pages, I will provide a description of each resource, and compare and contrast the different applications. I will then examine how the advance in technology affects both the librarian and library user.

The first experience I had with a visual search function in a reader's advisory resource was Books & Authors. This is a subscription service that functions similarly to NoveList, but offers a unique feature called Who What Where When. For your convenience, I have included a [video demonstration](#) of the feature. Who What Where When uses Venn diagrams as a visual representation of the selections the user makes. To perform the search, the user enters very specific search criteria in any or all of the limiters. Each limiter is represented by a proportional circle, and overlapping sections are searchable. Books & Authors does not provide much information on how the feature works, but it seems to be an algorithm that pulls from information stored in the database. This technology is more advanced than general cataloging would be, providing more detailed information about characters, plots, and settings. The specificity of the search limiters can also be a detractor, for a couple of different reasons. The first is that when using incredibly definite search terms, the results will be very limited, or even nonexistent. The second is that the feature only helps a patron that has something explicit in mind. While the search may be more advanced than a library catalog, there are other reader's advisory websites that could offer the same depth of searching.   The visual element is what make the Who What Where When feature special.

A coworker recommended www.literature-map.com to me after I finished reading a series, and was having a hard time deciding what to read next. A [demonstration](#) of the site is available. I contacted the website developer, Marek Gibney, and he gave me a little background on the site, and how it functions. He told me that he started with a

music site in 2002 (www.gnoosic.com). He called it "Global Network of Dreams" (Gnod) (Gibney). Later, he added literature and movies. The maps were not created until later, after all of the sites had been up and running for a while. Gibney reports that the maps are now the most "most popular parts of Gnod" (Gibney). Technology wise, Gibney claims "all algorithms I use are my own, developed from scratch," and that he uses "linux, mysql, apache and php" for the programming.

The map, which has been described as "a seizure-inducing ever-moving visual map," is more visually dynamic than the Books & Authors website, but lacks some of the functionality (Monroe County Library System). The author query is shown in the center of the map, and the recommended read-a-likes float around it. According to the website, "The closer two writers are, the more likely someone will like both of them" (Literature-Map). Each of the results is also searchable. The drawback of this website is that no information beyond author names is provided. There is no easy way for a user to find out what titles the author has written, and there is nothing to support *why* the recommendation was given. Many authors write for more than one genre, so it can be important to know the reason a suggestion was given when considering new authors.

Aside from not providing additional information, some of the results are questionable. For an example, "James Patterson" was entered as a search term. Above the name, slightly to the left, Kathy Reichs and Jeffrey Deaver are so close they appear to be touching. That makes sense, as they both write similar novels that appeal to the same audience. Directly above the two names is Nicholas Sparks. Sparks definitely has a different style of writing, and his readers may find a Reichs or Deaver

book unsettling. That issue seems to be tied to not knowing what information was used to provide the results.

The final website I want to highlight is www.whichbook.net. Whichbook is a philanthropic project run by Opening the Book, a "leading UK provider of library training, library interior design and consultancy in reader development for libraries" (www.openingthebook.com). This video demonstrates how the visual search feature works. I contacted Rachel Van Riel, director of Opening the Book, for information about the technology that supports the website. She stated that Whichbook "was first developed as part of a publicly funded training programme called Branching Out that Opening the Book ran from 1998-2001" (Van Riel). She goes on to describe that it is a database-driven site with a searching algorithm" (Van Riel). The updated version allows a user to manipulate up to four sliding limiters to get book recommendations.

Whichbook is different from Books & Authors and Literature-Map because it makes a conscious effort *not* to include bestsellers. As noted on the website, the folks at Whichbook "concentrate on the books people won't find by themselves and go for the widest range possible" (www.whichbook.net). That is a risky move, which could alienate users that want to read more popular fiction. However, the slider feature does offer the user an experience that is not found on other reader's advisory websites. As noted in an article published in VINE, "whichbook begins with the reader, offering elements of that elusive 'good read' we are looking for but do not know quite how to define" (Van Riel 140). Instead of demanding the user know what he is looking for in a character, plot, or setting, Whichbook asks the read what he wants to get out of the

book, which "allows individual users to define their 'good read' subjectively" (Van Riel 140).

In conclusion, Books & Authors, Literature-Map, and Whichbook are all unique reader's advisory resources, but they each provide a dynamic visual feature that makes the resource appeal to the 2.0 generation. Van Riel best expresses the concept when she states "the process is not a purposive search through known quantities but rather an experiment in creating a new mix in which elements are added, modified and removed in a spirit of play" (Van Riel 140). The *spirit of play* attitude seems to reflect the way users spend their time on the web. The internet is certainly used to search for information, but leisure time searching is usually referred to as 'surfing' or 'browsing.' The animated illustration feature of the user's search lends itself well to the idea that finding new books, and reading in general, can be fun, and still has a place in today's society. Adding the interactive resources to a public library webpage has the potential to shine a spotlight on the library's other online services, including digital content, online reference help, premium database, and others. It can create a conversational spark that allows both users and librarians to examine and redefine the role of the public library.

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