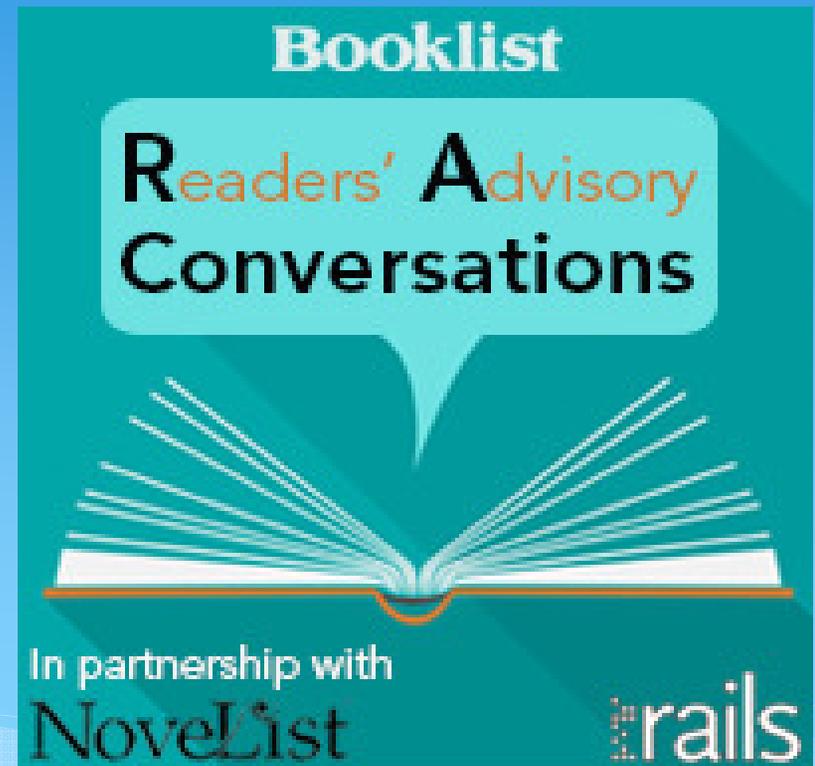


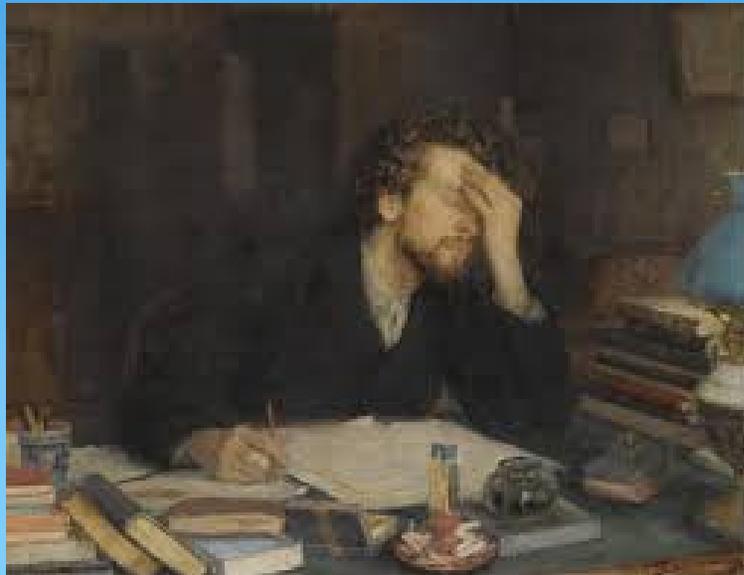
Book Review Basics: Using Reviews and Annotations for RA

Rebecca Vnuk
Adult Books Editor,
Collection Management and
Library Outreach

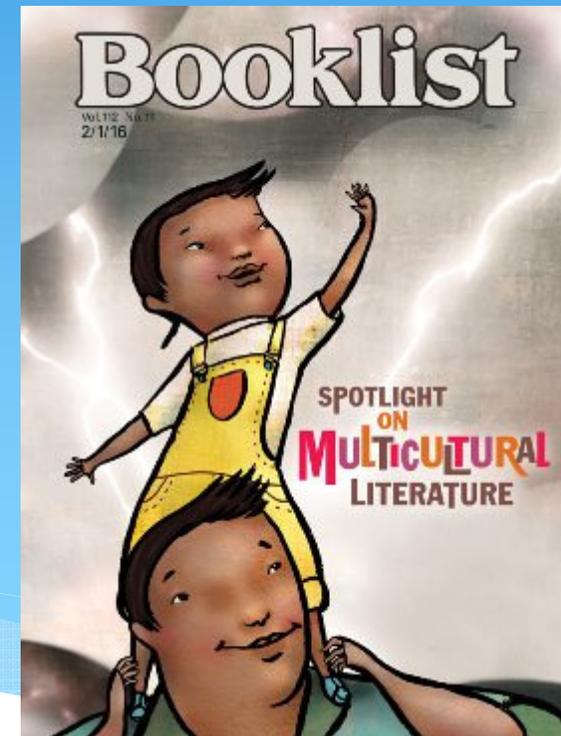
Booklist
rvnuk@ala.org



Part One: Writing Your Own Reviews and Annotations

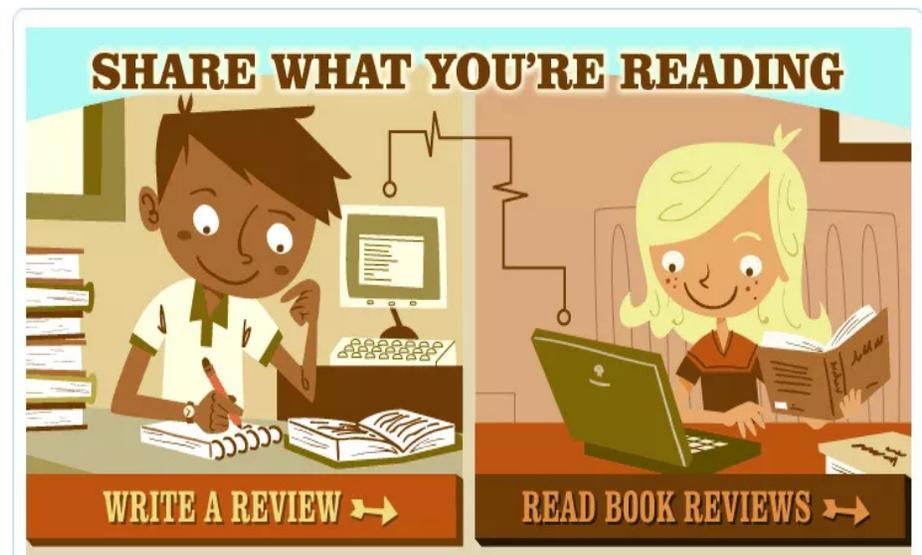


Part Two: Using Reviews for RA purposes



What type of publication are you writing for?

- Library newsletter
- Library website/blog
- In-library signage/handouts
- Review publication
- Personal blog



What are appeals?



Storyline

- Action-packed? Issue-oriented?

Pace

- Fast? Leisurely? Intensifying?

Tone

- Atmospheric? Moving? Offbeat?

Writing style

- Gritty? Lyrical? Journalistic?

Characters

- Sassy? Authentic? Unreliable?

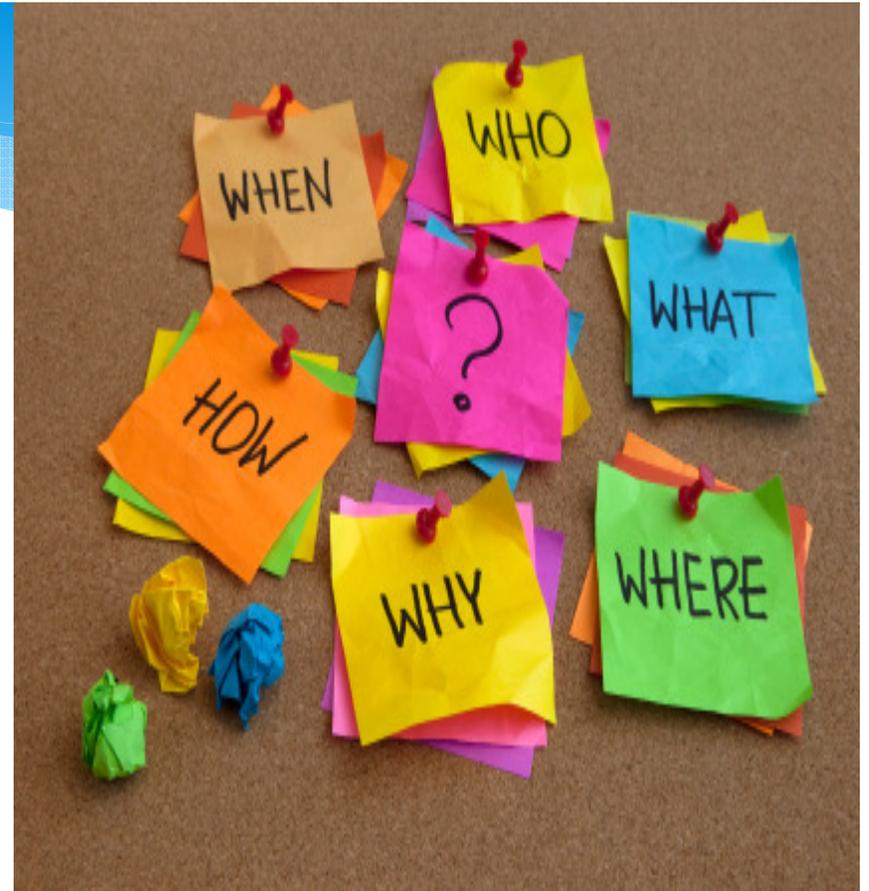
Things to consider as you read:

What's the general field or genre?
Does the book fit?

What is the author's style? Formal?
Informal?

Nonfiction: Are the ideas developed?
What areas are covered, not covered?
How accurate is the information?

Fiction: What kind of reader would like this book?
What appeal factors come into play?



Nonfiction Tips

Scope - what does the book cover?

Accuracy of text and illustration; currency; bias of author

Authority of author - qualifications to write on topic

Appropriateness to subject and target age group in terms of concepts, terminology, arrangement

Presence of features such as tables of contents, glossaries, further reading suggestions, indexes

Illustrations - Are they informative, well placed in relation to text, and appropriate to subject matter?

Are important points? illustrated clearly? What about maps and charts?

Consider format, general appearance. Is binding durable, easy to open, of good quality?

Estimated age of target audience. Is the language, structure, and vocabulary appropriate?

Note any controversial element that might prove problematic. Emphasis should be inform, not judge.

Biographies - Is the character realistically portrayed or is he or she discussed as a one-sided, larger than life figure?

Fiction Tips

How convincing and accurate is the time and place?

Are facts about the setting worked naturally into the text or story or do they seem added on?

Are the characters realistic?

Do readers see them grow and develop within the story?

Do they act in ways logical for their ages and circumstances?

Does the plot's action develop consistently and naturally?

Is it original or is it written to a formula?

What is the author trying to say?

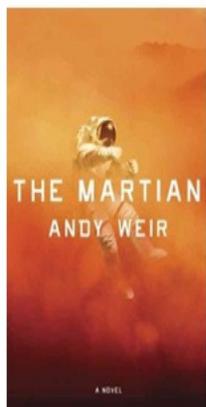
Is the language appropriate to the subject?

Is dialog natural and in balance with narration?

What is the approximate age appeal of the book?

Note any controversial element that might prove problematic. Emphasis should be inform, not judge.

Reviews vs Annotations



The Martian: A Novel

by Andy Weir

Near-Future SF. Stranded on Mars after an aborted surface mission, astronaut Mark Watney must rely on his wits to survive on an inhospitable planet. As Watney documents his attempts to create food, water, and oxygen from limited resources, NASA officials scramble to come up with a way to increase his chances of survival until they can find a way to bring him back to Earth. Fans of hard science fiction and survival stories will appreciate this debut novel for its smart, likable lead who uses humor and technological ingenuity to make an impossible situation bearable.

Booklist Review

Adult Books - Fiction - Science Fiction & Fantasy - Science Fiction



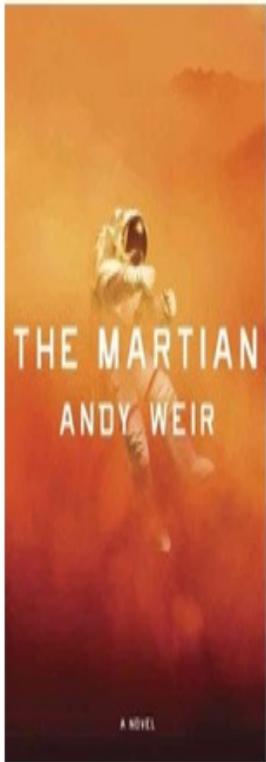
The Martian.

Weir, Andy (author).

Feb. 2014. 384p. Crown, hardcover, \$24 (9780804139021); Crown, e-book (9780804139038).

[REVIEW](#). First published [December 1, 2013 \(Booklist\)](#).

Remember *Man Plus*, Frederik Pohl's award-winning 1976 novel about a cyborg astronaut who's sent, alone, to Mars? Imagine, instead, that the astronaut was just a regular guy, part of a team sent to the red planet, and that, through a series of tragic events, he's left behind, stranded and facing certain death. That's the premise of this gripping and (given its subject matter) startlingly plausible novel. The story is told mostly through the log entries of astronaut Mark Watney, chronicling his efforts to survive: making the prefab habitat livable and finding a way to grow food, make water, and get himself off the planet. Interspersed among the log entries are sections told from the point of view of the NASA specialists, back on Earth, who discover that Watney is not dead (as everyone assumed) and scramble together a rescue plan. There are some inevitable similarities between the book and the 1964 movie *Robinson Crusoe on Mars*, but where the movie was a broad sci-fi adventure, the novel is a tightly constructed and completely believable story of a man's ingenuity and strength in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Riveting.



The Martian: A Novel

by Andy Weir

Near-Future SF. Stranded on Mars after an aborted surface mission, astronaut Mark Watney must rely on his wits to survive on an inhospitable planet. As Watney documents his attempts to create food, water, and oxygen from limited resources, NASA officials scramble to come up with a way to increase his chances of survival until they can find a way to bring him back to Earth. Fans of hard science fiction and survival stories will appreciate this debut novel for its smart, likable lead who uses humor and technological ingenuity to make an impossible situation bearable.

Two lines of plot

Character appeal

Audience

Booklist Review

Adult Books - Fiction - Science Fiction & Fantasy - Science Fiction



The Martian.

Weir, Andy (author).

Feb. 2014. 384p. Crown, hardcover, \$24 ([9780804139021](#)); Crown, e-book ([9780804139038](#)).

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Longer plot description

Appeal buzzwords

Comparisons

Wrap-up with more on appeal

Library newsletter, website/blog, or shelf talkers

Short:

Keep it simple

100 words

Hit major appeal points

Longer (best for online):

150-200 words

Plot description

How personal do you want to get?



NextReads
Find your next read

Armchair Travel
October 2014

"People don't take trips -- trips take people."
- John Steinbeck (1902-1968), American author, *Travels with Casey*

New and Recently Released!

Travels with Casey
by Benoit Denizet-Lewis



Author and professor Benoit Denizet-Lewis and his mixed-breed retriever Casey lived together for nearly a decade. Deciding to explore the world of dogs and the humans who love them, the pair took a 13,000-mile cross-country RV trip. They visited farm dogs, various other dogs as well as a dog trainer Cesar Milan, a stray with dog, and many other dogs. For other books in this series, pick up John David Rose's *The Emperor Far Away*.

The Emperor Far Away
by David Rose



China borders 15 other countries, and its 1.3 billion people are a mix of many different cultures and languages. In this book, Rose tells the story of his journey to the heart of the desert by following the Silk Road, a competing modern culture around the world.

NextReads
Find your next read

Armchair Travel



Now and Recently Released!

Travels with Casey by Benoit Denizet-Lewis
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The Emperor Far Away by David Rose
China borders 15 other countries, and its 1.3 billion people are a mix of many different cultures and languages. In this book, Rose tells the story of his journey to the heart of the desert by following the Silk Road, a competing modern culture around the world.

In the Kingdom of Ice: The Grand and Terrible Polar Voyage of the USS Jeannette by Haakon Arne
On his first polar voyage in 1879, sailing in the Jeannette north to Alaska and George De Long, but he also became a dramatic account of what happened to De Long and his crew. In this book, Rose tells the story of his journey to the heart of the desert by following the Silk Road, a competing modern culture around the world.

Staff Pick

We recommend...
Travels with Casey

Why I enjoyed this book

Author and professor Benoit Denizet-Lewis wasn't at all sure that his mixed-breed retriever Casey liked him...even though they'd been together for nearly a decade. Deciding to explore the world of dogs and the humans who love them (and to help him understand his relationship with Casey), the pair took a 13,000-mile cross-country RV trip. They visited farm dogs, racing dogs, wolf-dog hybrids, and various other dogs as well as a dog rescuer, a K9 cop, a psychic who works with dogs, and more.

STAFF PICK!

Travels with Casey
by Benoit Denizet-Lewis

A moody Labrador and his insecure human share a whimsical, cross-country RV trip into the heart of America's relationship with dogs, relating the stories of Appalachian wolf-dogs, a dedicated stray rescuer, a K9 cop and more.

REVIEWING ON BLOGS



- Your library blog
- Your personal blog
- Get your feet wet on Amazon
- Take cues from existing blogs and websites

RA FOR ALL

LOOKING FOR YOUR NEXT GOOD READ? RA FOR ALL IS A BLOG TO SHOWCASE HOW THE READERS' ADVISORS AT YOUR LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARY CAN HELP.

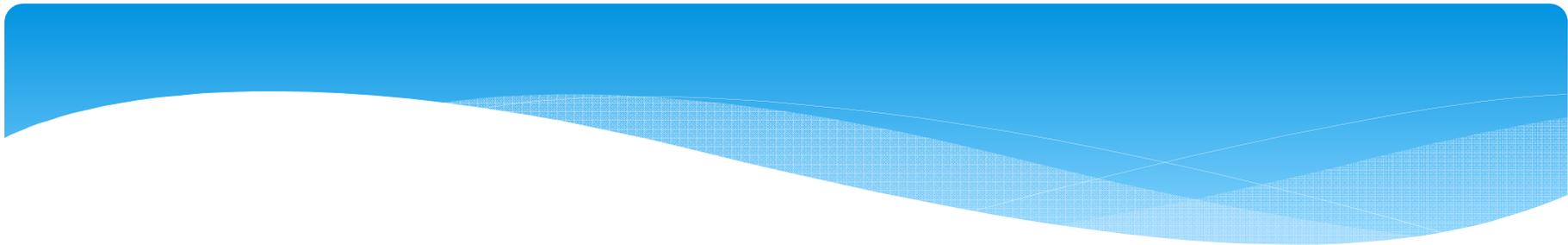
ARRT GENRE STUDY WEBSITE

[Click here](#) for quick access to all of the materials for the 2014-15 Crime Fiction Genre Study. Please note, some information will be password protected for members only. [Click here](#) for information about joining ARRT.

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Book Blogging 101

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Event Date: Dec 3, 2015

In this practical discussion, seasoned book bloggers Rebecca Vnuk and Karen Keefe will cover the benefits of starting a personal or library-related book blog, including various platforms to choose from, how to get started, what to talk about, how to stay motivated, how to publicize your blog, and more. This program is part of the RA Conversations series, sponsored by NovelList.



Book Blogging 101

0:00 / 1:11:14

Book Blogging 101 Session:
<https://www.railslibraries.info/ce/archive/105805>

Blogs allow more freedom

RA FOR ALL

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ARRT GENRE STUDY WEBSITE

CLICK HERE for quick access to the materials for the 2016-17 Speculative Fiction Genre Study. The website now features **UNRESTRICTED** access, including notes from our meetings; however, in order to attend the meetings in person, you must be a member of ARRT. **Click here** for information about how you can join.

RA FOR ALL...THE ROAD SHOW!

I can come to your library, book club meeting, or conference to talk about how to help your readers find their next good read. **Click here** for more information.

TUESDAY, MAY 5, 2015

What I'm Reading: The Martian



Okay, enough procrastinating. Time for some serious review catch up.

Back in January (!) I listened to *The Martian* by Andy Weir. Hopefully the fact that this book was a huge debut hit in 2014 is not news to you. It won numerous awards for both the book and the audio. [You can find more specific audio info a bit further down on this

page.] Yet, despite all of the accolades, I am still finding that some readers are hesitant to read "a book with an astronaut on the cover" [actual patron quote].

Well, I am here to help change that. Let's start where I always like to begin in these reviews, with my book promotion sound bite. In this case though, let's think about how we book talk this title to patrons before I give you the soundbite.

Look at the cover! We do not need to lead our soundbite to patrons with anything about space or Mars. People, those are both clearly on the cover. When we are hand-selling books, we need to provide the info they cannot get from looking at the cover. We need to capture their attention with **THE WHY** they would enjoy the book.

Here is what I have created as my 30 seconds or less review:

Becky's Soundbite Synopsis: " *The Martian* is the most thought-provoking MacGyver story ever. You will fall hard for Mark as you follow him, and those back on earth trying to help him. You will laugh, you will tear up, you will perch on the edge of your seat, you will cheer for joy, and ultimately, your faith in all humanity will be restored in this realistic space adventure that is just as much about how we all live together on Earth as it is about how to survive on Mars." [21 seconds]

RA FOR ALL CONTACT INFO



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RA FOR ALL: HORROR

RA for All: Horror

Collection Development Alert:
Stoker Preliminary Ballot -
Contrary to popular belief,
Halloween is NOT the best time to
work on your horror collection,
rather it is during award season--
just like any genre. It i...
3 days ago

PAGES

[Home](#)

Raforall.blogspot.com

On: 2001-2013

As you can see, I have led with the fact that it is smart and fun ("thought provoking," "MacGyver"). This is the most important appeal of the book that needs to be conveyed. Again, the cover shows the space part, but does not get to the fun, humor, adventure, and serious issues that are explored in this novel. That's why such a wide range of readers will like it.

But let's also note what I **DO NOT** do here. I do not spend time on a long description of the set up of how Mark got to be "The Martian." Most reviews begin with that and I think it is a mistake. It is called **THE MARTIAN**. We get it. There is a guy on Mars. I see him real big there on the cover. Your job is to tell people why they want to read a book about that. **You will capture their attention and earn their respect as their best book discovery tool if you rise above the obvious.**

Okay, enough about the DON'Ts.

Then my soundbite moves on to Mark. Ahh, Mark. We love him. If you want a hero you can believe in and root for, Mark is for you. So as not to repeat myself, scroll down a bit to my notes on the narration for more info about Mark as a character. He will make both men and women swoon.

Next part of the soundbite... I, very quickly, mention a key twist in the story without spoiling too much-- the fact that after we read for a bit and just as we have become fully captivated by Mark, the POV changes and we are with the people on Earth working for NASA who figure out that Mark is still alive and surviving on Mars. This was an upsetting switch at first [I missed Mark], but I quickly got involved in the characters, issues, and emerging stories from "the home front." The effect of the shifting POV made the book even better.

Now all this being said, this book has a lot of math and science; this fact need to be mentioned and not downplayed. But Mark is so endearing that even readers who are less scientifically inclined (like myself) will happily sit by and watch him "geek out," as we wait for the story to continue. [I have corroborated my opinion with close to a dozen other readers]. My soundbite only hints at that ["how to survive on Mars"], so if a patron is intrigued by your soundbite and is considering reading this novel, I would mention this point too.

Feel free to use my soundbite as you promote this book to readers, just please cite **RA for All** as the source.

One final note, the ending was **PERFECT**. "The Martian" issue was resolved, but it was not all neatly tied up in a bow. It was triumphant [for now] but realistic about not knowing what is to come, for Mark, for the space program, and for the state of international cooperation in general. [See I wasn't kidding when I said this book was thought-provoking].

Reading Maps Monday Discussion Archive

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HORROR



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Tweets

Becky Spratford @RAforAll 12m
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raforall.blogspot.com/2016/01/wh

The Horror Show @thehorrorshowBK 4h
Vote For The Horror Show thehorrorshowwithbriankeene.com
Retweeted by Becky Spratford
Show Summary

The AV Club @TheAVClub 19h
Author and @ic9 editor-in-chief @charliejane recommends 5 great sci-fi/fantasy books
avc.li/23nuH1T
pic.twitter.com/WTJvD4kCV
Retweeted by Becky Spratford

BROWN

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Becky's Soundbite Synopsis: "*The Martian* is the most thought-provoking MacGyver story ever. You will fall hard for Mark as you follow him, and those back on earth trying to help him. You will laugh, you will tear up, you will perch on the edge of your seat, you will cheer for joy, and ultimately, your faith in all humanity will be restored in this realistic space adventure that is just as much about how we all live together on Earth as it is about how to survive on Mars." [21 seconds]

As you can see, I have led with the fact that it is smart and fun ("thought provoking," "MacGyver"). This is the most important appeal of the book that needs to be conveyed. Again, the cover shows the space part, but does not get to the fun, humor, adventure, and serious issues that are explored in this novel. That's why such a wide range of readers will like it.

Possible Limiters: Mark uses the F word a lot, but he is stuck on Mars, so while it is used a lot, it seems appropriate for the circumstances. That being said, while I think this book would be perfect for a teen reader, I would disclose this info to any nervous parents first.

Three Words That Describe This Book: compelling, thought provoking, witty

Readalikes: After finishing *The Martian* some may want to run out and read more about Mars and how we could survive on this hostile planet. Those readers should try the well reviewed [Trailblazing Mars: NASA's Next Giant Leap](#) by Pat Duggins or, to keep with Mark's sense of humor, but in nonfiction this time, [Mars: A Survival Guide](#) by Guy Murphy.

Those who just want a few articles or discussions and not an entire book on the topic should [click here for the Reddit Space thread](#) on the accuracy of the novel or [here](#) for an interview with Weir or [here](#) for a book review from the professional Space News journal.

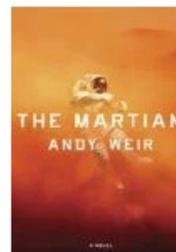
Now in terms of other novel options, those who want to give more accessible, hard science fiction a try should definitely check out the work of [Iain Banks](#). He wrote thought-provoking, compelling and witty science fiction up until his death at 2013. Some, not all, was set in space. The [Culture Universe](#) series which begins with [Consider Phlebas](#) is a good place for fans of *The Martian* to begin.

By Karen Kleckner Keefe | February 24, 2014

0 Comments

The Future Could Be Funny, People

It's rare enough to see a debut novel on the New York Times Bestseller List. But a Science Fiction debut? Wow! This is why Andy Weir's clever thriller, **The Martian** is worth a look. Astronaut Mark Watney is left for dead when his crew leaves Mars after a disastrous dust storm. Not only is he not dead, he's literally the only person left on the planet and pretty sure that nobody's coming back for him. His industrious attempts at survival are at turns heroic and harrowing. Mark's wry perspective on his future makes this page-turner more than just a futuristic thriller. This is a call-in-sick, lie-to-the-kids, eat-meals-in-your-bed, genre-defying great read.



For science fiction fans who enjoy a little levity with their light sabers, recommend:

- ▶ **The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy** by Douglas Adams
- ▶ **In the Garden of Eden** by Kage Baker
- ▶ **Shards of Honor** by Lois McMaster Bujold
- ▶ **Ready Player One** by Ernest Cline
- ▶ **Snow Crash** by Neal Stephenson

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Publishers Weekly:

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Kirkus:

Also tough, does lists open freelance needs: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/about/careers/>

VOYA:

Application guidelines: <http://www.voyamagazine.com/reviewers/>

Your local newspaper

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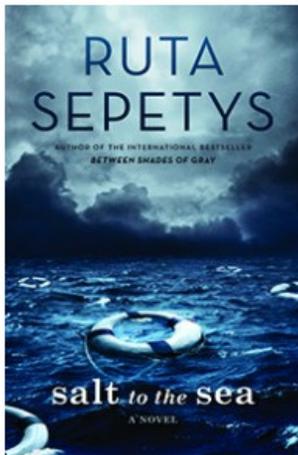
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The top ten books published this month that librarians across the country love.

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February 2016 LibraryReads List



Salt to the Sea

by Ruta Sepetys

Published: 2/2/2016

by Philomel Books

ISBN: 9780399160301



“Titanic. Lusitania. Wilhelm Gustloff. All major maritime disasters, yet the last is virtually unknown. Ruta Sepetys changes that in her gripping historical novel. Told in short snippets, *Salt to the Sea* rotates between four narrators attempting to escape various tragedies in 1945 Europe. Powerful and haunting, heartbreaking and hopeful—a must read.”

Jennifer Asimakopoulos, Indian Prairie Public Library, Darien, IL

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Nuts and Bolts of Reviewing

What is the style of the publication? What are the expectations?

What tone will you take: chatty, informal/strictly professional

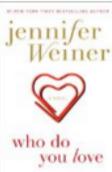
How to learn from your editor

Booklist Review

Booklist Review

Adult Books - Fiction - General Fiction

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★   **Who Do You Love.**
Weiner, Jennifer (author).
Aug. 2015. 372p. Atria, hardcover, \$27
(9781451617818).
[REVIEW](#). First published [August, 2015](#)
([Booklist](#)).

amazon.com

BARNES & NOBLE

INDIE BOUND

Rachel and Andy meet when they are children and reconnect as teenagers, falling into a pattern of finding and losing one another again as adults. Rachel, who was born with a heart defect, is recuperating in the hospital yet again when she comes across Andy, who is there with a broken arm. They couldn't be more different—Rachel is spoiled by her wealthy, over-protective parents, while Andy and his single mom live in near poverty—but they have an instant connection. When they meet again by chance on a high-school volunteer trip, they fall madly in love the way that only teenagers can. In college, Rachel ends up a sorority girl, while Andy relentlessly trains to make the Olympic track team, and even though the two have different life goals, they are drawn to each other again and again. But can they overcome their differences? Weiner's latest is pure romance and utterly heart tugging, showcasing her ability to write characters that readers will instantly connect with, flaws and all. There is a special delight here in getting to know Rachel and Andy from childhood to adulthood, and readers will find themselves laughing, crying, and hoping right along with the pair.

HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Weiner's previous novels have always contained romantic elements, but this one is decidedly a romance. That won't matter to women's fiction fans, who will drive it to the top of the best-seller lists.

— Rebecca Vnuk

This title has been recommended for young adult readers:

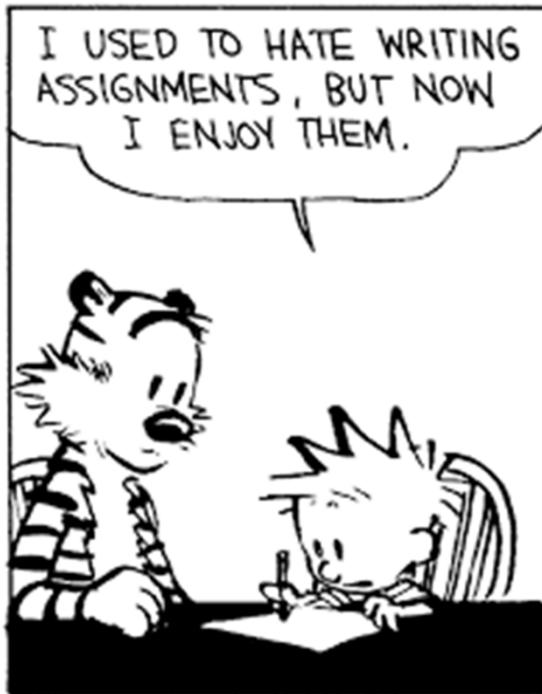
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Any questions before we continue?



I don't want to review books any more. It cuts in too much on my reading.

— Dorothy Parker —

AZ QUOTES

Now that you know how to write about books, what should you be looking for when you read reviews?

- Look for those appeal characteristics and buzz words.
- Look for audience.
- Read with an eye towards which of your patrons might be interested.
- Note when other authors and titles are mentioned, and go down the rabbit hole!

Storyline	• Action-packed? Issue-oriented?
Pace	• Fast? Leisurely? Intensifying?
Tone	• Atmospheric? Moving? Offbeat?
Writing style	• Gritty? Lyrical? Journalistic?
Characters	• Sassy? Authentic? Unreliable?

A Publication of the Public Library Association

PUBLIC LIBRARIES ONLINE

MAGAZINE FEATURE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010

Jack of All Trades Readers' Advisory: How to Learn a Little About a Lot

By Rebecca Vnuk on May 9, 2013

When it comes to the study of readers' advisory, there is plenty of sage advice out there on the theory of helping someone find a book. It's important to get to know what your reader is in the mood for. Try to understand what your reader is looking for by asking questions regarding what they've read recently, what they enjoy or don't enjoy in their books, what are some of their favorite books and authors? All readers' advisors should be aware of different appeal factors and what they mean: mood/ tone, language, story, character, and so on. (You can find out more about these in Joyce Saricks' books, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* and *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*.)

So if you know the right questions to ask, and what the appeal factors mean, you're all set to work that readers' advisory desk, right? Well, no. In everyday

49



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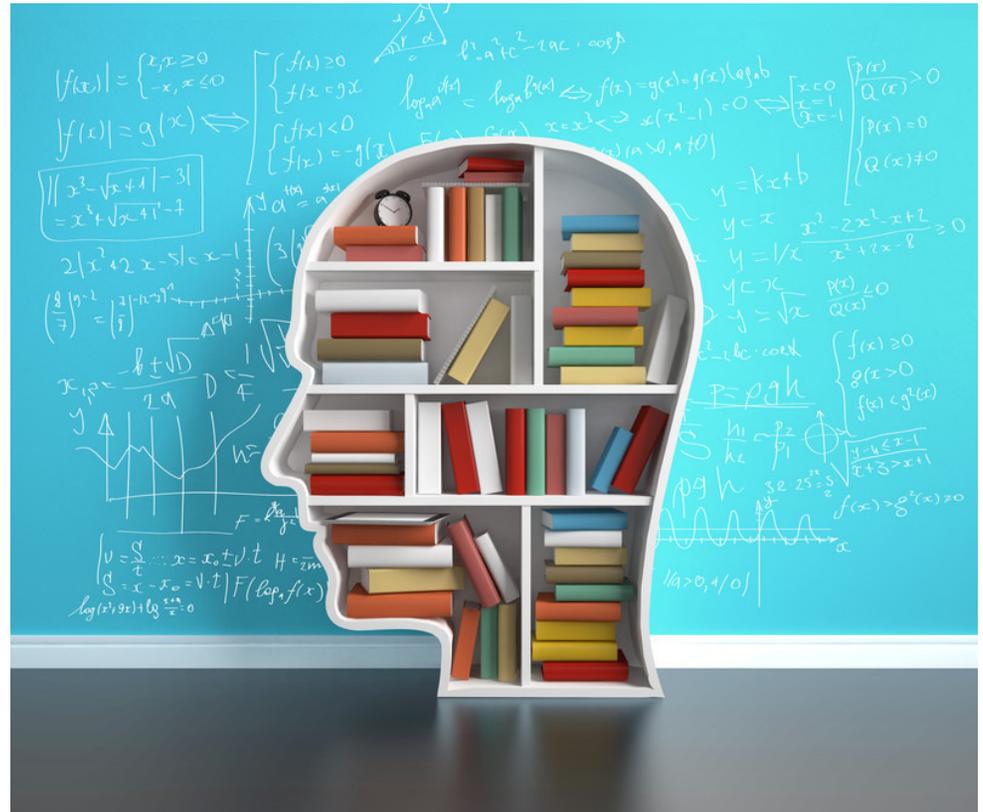
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Booklist's Core Collections and Top 10 Lists

Adult Books - Nonfiction

1. **Core Collection: Multicultural American Family Histories.**
Seaman, Donna (author).

FEATURE. First published February 1, 2016 (*Booklist*).

Adult Books - Nonfiction - Science

2. **Core Collection: Our Brains, Ourselves.**
Seaman, Donna (author).

FEATURE. First published December 1, 2015 (*Booklist*).

Adult Books - Nonfiction - Arts

3. **Core Collection: Artistic Hot Spots.**
Seaman, Donna (author).

FEATURE. First published November 1, 2015 (*Booklist*).

Adult Books - Fiction - Romance

4. **Core Collection: Small-Town Romance.**
Charles, John (author).

FEATURE. First published September 15, 2015 (*Booklist*).

Adult Books - Nonfiction - Business

5. **The Cost of College: Core Collection.**
Hooper, Brad (author).

FEATURE. First published July, 2015 (*Booklist*).

Adult Books - Nonfiction - Arts

6. **Core Collection: The Stars of Comedy.**
Seaman, Donna (author).

FEATURE. First published June 1, 2015 (*Booklist*).

Media - Adult Fiction - Crime Fiction - Mystery

7. **Core Collection: Essential Cozies on Audio and in Print.**
Saricks, Joyce (author).

FEATURE. First published May 1, 2015 (*Booklist*).

Adult Books - Fiction

8. **Core Collection: Ensemble Women's Fiction.**
Vnuk, Rebecca (author).

FEATURE. First published March 15, 2015 (*Booklist*).

TOP 10 MULTICULTURAL NONFICTION

SPOTLIGHT

The best works of multicultural nonfiction reviewed in *Booklist* between February 1, 2015, and January 2016 are written with valiant candor and breathtaking eloquence and cover a broad spectrum, from the ancient peoples of the Southwest to the experiences of African Americans and immigrants past and present.

Between the World and Me. By Ta-Nehisi Coates. 2015. Spiegel & Grau, \$24 (9780812993547).

In this concentrated and potent book, Coates reveals what it means to be an African American now, encompassing the tragic legacy of the past and the injustices of today.

Daughters of the Samurai: A Journey from East to West and Back. By Janice P. Nimura. 2015. Norton, \$26.95 (9780393077995).

Nimura tracks five nineteenth-century Japanese girls who were sent to live in America for 10 years and, upon their return, sparked a revolution in Japanese women's education.

A House of My Own: Stories from My Life. By Sandra Cisneros. 2015. Knopf, \$28.95 (9780385351331).

Cisneros creates a patchwork-quilt memoir out of more than 40 essays in which she reflects on the meaning of home and her struggles as a self-described "American Mexican" and "working-class writer."

The Light of the World. By Elizabeth Alexander. 2015. Grand Central, \$26 (9781455599875).

With spellbinding grace, poet Alexander tells the story of her joyful marriage to exuberantly creative Ficre Ghebreyesus, an Eritrean refugee artist and chef; her grief after his sudden death; and the healing radiance of art and literature.

The Lost World of the Old Ones: Discoveries in the Ancient Southwest. By David Roberts. 2015. Norton, \$27.95 (9780393241624).

Roberts guides readers into the wilds of the Southwest and far back in time, reporting on findings illuminating the lives of groups such as the ancient Fremont Puebloans.

Martin Ramirez: Framing His Life and Art. By Victor M. Espinosa. 2015. Univ. of Texas, \$40 (9781477307755).

Espinosa's groundbreaking biography reveals the hard facts about Martin Ramirez, a Mexican immigrant artist whose spectacular drawings are owned by major museums yet who lost his family, land, identity, and freedom, and never received a penny.

Negroland. By Margo Jefferson. 2015. Pantheon, \$25 (9780307378453).

In her beautifully written memoir of growing up in an upper-class African American family in Chicago in the 1960s and '70s, Jefferson addresses issues of class that complicate the quest for racial unity.

Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence. By Jonathan Sacks. 2015. Schocken, \$28.95 (9780805243345).

Sacks closely examines and repudiates the use of scripture by Jews, Christians, and Muslims to perpetuate an us-them dualism and legitimize terrorist attacks on peacefully multicultural societies.

Street Poison: The Biography of Iceberg Slim. By Justin Gifford. 2015. Doubleday, \$26.95 (9780385538343).

In the first full biography of Robert "Iceberg Slim" Beck (1918-92), Gifford tells the dramatic, sharply relevant story of the African American pulp writer who inspired gangsta rap, hip-hop, and street lit.

We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future. By Deepa Iyer. 2015. New Press, \$25.95 (9781620970140).

Iyer draws on the personal experiences (including her own) of young South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh immigrants living in communities that have suffered backlash and hate crimes.



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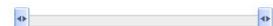
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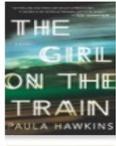
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1.  **The girl on the train** (Jan 2015)

By: Hawkins, Paula

Rachel is a washed-up thirty-something who creates a fantasy about the seemingly perfect couple she sees during her daily train ride into London. When the woman goes missing, Rachel manages to insert herself into the investigation of the woman's disappearance. In the vein of *Gone Girl*, this dark psychological thriller is fast-paced and features some very unreliable narrators. -- Andrea Larson for LibraryReads.

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The girl on the train

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Read-alikes

1. **The collector**

Roberts, Nora

Reason: Both of these suspenseful, fast-paced novels owe their premises to the Hitchcock film *Rear Window*, but where *The Girl on the Train* is a complex novel of psychological suspense narrated by three linked women, *The Collector* is pure romantic suspense. -- Shauna Griffin

2. **The other woman's house**

Hannah, Sophie, 1971-

Reason: In these absorbing psychological suspense stories, women who believe they've witnessed something shady are personally, dangerously drawn into the ensuing police investigations. Obsession -- and real estate -- also play a role in both novels. -- Shauna Griffin

3. **Try not to breathe**

Seddon, Holly

Reason: These chilling psychological suspense novels star dysfunctional, alcoholic female leads who have lost nearly everything thanks to their drinking... and who become dangerously obsessed with solving tragic cases. -- Shauna Griffin

4. **Gone girl**

Flynn, Gillian, 1971-

Reason: Possible murders at the center of unsuccessful marriages fuel these chilling, fast-paced psychological suspense stories. Both feature multiple unreliable narrators and shocking plot twists. -- Anthea Goffe

The Girl on the Train (Show Details)



The Girl on the Train

by Paula Hawkins

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions contain detailed plot information that some readers may prefer to encounter as surprises.

The Girl on the Train introduces us to hard-drinking Rachel Watson, whose life has gone off the rails. Tired of her alcoholism, her husband Tom has left and since remarried a woman (Anna) and had a child with her. After a drunken fiasco at work, Rachel's job is gone too. Hiding the truth from those closest to her, she continues her train commute into London every day to maintain the illusion of normalcy. As the train takes Rachel past her old neighborhood, she develops a habit of watching the people in the homes she passes. She becomes especially intrigued by one young couple, and imagines them going about their idyllic lives. Her illusion is shattered, however, when Megan -- the young woman of the couple -- goes missing.

The novel unfolds from multiple perspectives, including Tom's new wife Anna (who recounts Rachel's ongoing intrusions into her life with Tom), and of Megan herself. Catalyzed by Megan's disappearance, their interwoven stories reveal complex truths behind their relationships. Rachel may have important information about Megan's disappearance, but is dismissed by the police as an unreliable witness because she was drunk at the time. Falsely claiming to have Megan's friend, Rachel reaches out to Megan's husband, Scott. Meanwhile, the stress of Megan's disappearance adds to Anna's ongoing frustrations with her suburban life -- and with Tom. Megan's story fleshes out her checkered past, focusing on the year prior to her disappearance, it is a life filled with loss, personal tragedy, and the secrets she keeps from her husband.

Infidelity abounds among these characters: we learn that Anna and Tom had an affair while he was still married to Rachel. Megan indulges in sexual thrill-seeking, and is hiding several affairs (including one with her therapist) from her husband. As these sordid details emerge, the list of possible suspects in Megan's disappearance expands; when heavy rains uncover her murdered body in nearby woods, it's obvious that everyone is hiding something.

Piecing together her drunken memories of the night Megan disappeared, Rachel discovers that her ex-husband Tom was with Megan. Rachel confronts Anna with this information, and reveals that Tom has hidden other secrets from her as well. Anna begins to believe Rachel -- particularly when Tom arrives home and violently prevents Rachel from leaving. In their dramatic confrontation, Rachel finally fights back -- fatally stabbing Tom.

In the aftermath, Anna testifies to Tom's attack and Rachel's actions are ruled self-defense. Evidence found while exploring Tom's death proves him guilty of Megan's murder -- the result of a sexual affair that turned ugly. As the novel ends, we learn that Megan and Anna have their own secrets surrounding Tom's death -- and Rachel leaves town by train, seeking a new life.

Discussion Questions

The following questions and answers should spark discussion of this book, but are not all there is to say. Readers bring offering viewpoints to the story's characters, events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is part of what makes book groups rewarding. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas!

Why do rain and water appear as recurring images in the novel?

It is tempting to dismiss the ongoing showers in *The Girl on the Train* as a quirk of British climate. However, the timing and occurrence of rainfall serves a symbolic role in this novel. A reporter describes how Megan's body was discovered "submerged in floodwater in a field" and only uncovered by recent heavy rains (p. 159). A police spokesperson later emphasizes that her body's exposure to the elements -- but particular its submersion in water for several days -- will complicate determining cause of death (p. 173). Rain -- as still water -- hides her body, yet heavy rainfall uncovers her hidden body, bringing to light her fate.

The role of water in Megan's death parallels her infant daughter's tragic, accidental death by drowning. Megan describes living in a desolate coastal house, where she took the baby into the bath with her to warm up: "The rain was hammering down, the beams in the roof creaking" (p. 211). When her boyfriend returns, Megan awakens to find that she had fallen asleep in the tub and accidentally drowned their daughter. Drowning, she runs to the beach in the rain and feelingly considers drowning herself: "It was still raining. ... I thought about going in the water, but I was too scared" (p. 211). Her fear of the water -- of drowning -- makes the eventual discovery of submerged body both ironic and poignant.

The climax of the story -- when Rachel and Anna confront the truth about Tom's lies, affairs, and violence -- occurs against a backdrop of falling rain: "I can hear something, a hissing sound. There's a flash of light and I realize it's the rain, pouring down. It's dark outside, there's a storm. Lightning" (p. 314). The very moment of truth for the entire novel happens during a full summer thunderstorm -- a dynamic rainfall that cleanses and refreshes the landscape yet manifests hints of violence. However, as a result of their actions during that climactic scene, Rachel and Anna now share their own secrets. Rachel's departure for the coast hints at that undercurrent of continued secrecy, again embellished with the image of water: "under the sound of the sea there are murmurs of movement: someone or something, coming closer" (p. 322). Whether their secret remains hidden forever is an unanswered question at the end of the novel.

What significance does travel have in the story?

Travel to and from locations -- and the process of being in motion (like Rachel's daily commute) -- is one of the novel's recurring themes. It represents a type of escape, whether physical or mental, from the conditions of the present. By default, when you're going to some place, you're simultaneously leaving another behind; similarly, travel often serves to connect memories of the past with dreams of the future. Effectively on the run from the reality of her situation, Rachel spends her days drunkenly taking the train back and forth to London, pretending during that short space that her life isn't in tatters. Hearing the same train inspires Megan's own flights of imagination and memory:

I can hear the wheels clacking over the points, can almost feel it rocking. I can't see the faces of the passengers and I know they're just commuting to Euston to sit behind desks, but I can dream: of more exotic journeys, of adventures at the end of the line and beyond. In my



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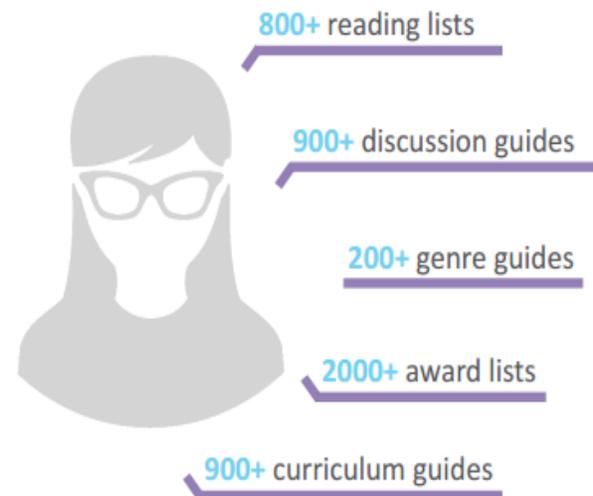
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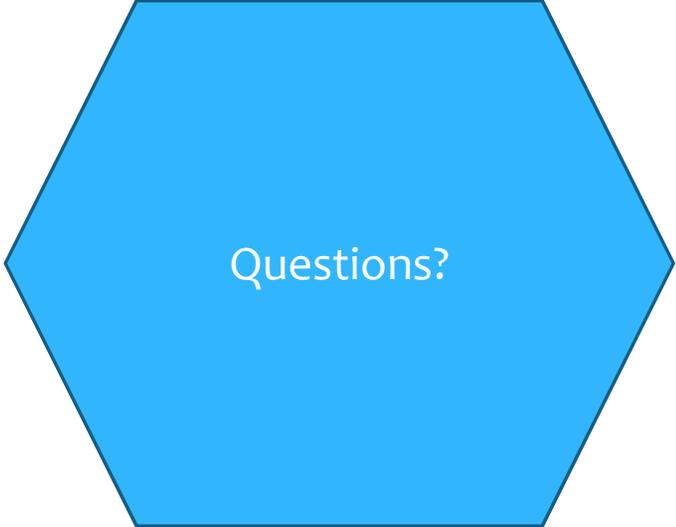
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