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Teen Readers Advisory Interview

For this reader's service advisory interview, I interviewed my cousin Jordan, who is a white cisgender female high school senior finishing up her senior year via Zoom in Fort Worth, Texas, before heading off to the University of Oklahoma in the fall. We are two of twenty-three grandchildren on our shared family side, so I don't get to hang out with her individually enough to know her reading preferences, though our interview did take on that more informal tone.

Since Jordan is in Texas, we took to FaceTime to talk from our respective homes and time zones. (A full transcript of the interview can be found at the end of this paper.) The interview itself fell pretty naturally into three sections: The first was about the kinds of books Jordan likes to read. We talked about not having enough time as a senior to read for fun, and about books she'd read recently that she'd particularly liked (*The Great Gatsby*, *In Cold Blood*) and ones that she'd disliked (*The Trial*), and why. She identified her preference for nonfiction over fiction and enjoying being able to relate to people who are similar to her age in narratives, and that helped lead into the second set of questions.

In the second section, we delved a little into nonfiction-specific questions, which explored Booth's appeal vocabulary. Since nonfiction can often skew towards the dense and detailed, I asked her to identify what kind of description she liked (engaging description and dialogue without a lot of set-up), as well as the pacing and length of books she tended to prefer (fast and short). We also discussed if there was anything she didn't like to see in books (too much time spent describing action).

During the final set of questions, we talked about the reasons for her preference of school library over public branch, as well as her habits of serendipitous browsing of the Half Price Books near her home and gaining title recommendations from friends.

I was quite surprised by Jordan's preference of nonfiction. While I'd expected that as a high school senior, most of her current/recent reading would be school-assigned, I was still expecting most of those to be fiction, and as such, influence her preference towards fiction simply because she would be reading so much of it—instead, the fiction she was reading for class pushed her towards nonfiction in her pleasure reading. In addition, I was really interested, particularly thinking about my own trajectory of reading and what I thought “grown up reading” meant, that Jordan considered nonfiction as a genre to read once you've started to grow up.

Her description of why she didn't like Kafka's *The Trial* (not knowing what's real and what isn't within the story; it was frustrating because the narrator “doesn't react to things like a normal person”) put me in mind of a broad theme across this semester's readings: young adults are increasingly aware of and

interacting with the world around them, as well as devastatingly aware of their future and their future place or role in society. Through this lens, Jordan's dislike of *The Trial*, as well as her interest in narratives that are engaging *because* the reader can relate and know that it is about "something that happened in the world or to a person", makes a really interesting case, particularly set against the millennial generation's acknowledged and well-recorded preference for escapist fiction.

Jordan also enjoys browsing serendipitously for her next read, which felt interesting given her preference for a specific type of nonfiction (though the general perceived lack of YA nonfiction may support this); this occurs more on her own at the local used bookstore rather than the public library, which she rarely frequents (although Half Price Books is truly more of a library than a bookstore in the scale of its holdings and winding stacks). She really likes spending time in her school library, but doesn't use it for finding her next read, and due to an elective class that offers its students the opportunity to be library assistants, her interactions with the school librarian(s) are limited to technology questions. When she does seek recommendations, she goes to her friends, the more readerly of whom share similar interests in books.

Overall, I thought the interview went well. I was absolutely not expecting Jordan to have a preference for nonfiction, so some of the questions I had prepared, even some more general ones, had to be adapted on the fly. As someone who hopes to go into reference work, it was a good practice and a good professional facsimile, though, especially in realizing how much baggage and expectations I was bringing to the interview, despite going in with questions that were designed not to push an answer in one specific direction. My genuine surprise also made me think on my feet in a way I didn't expect, and while I tended to give what I realize now is too many options in a single question, I think it would help me get to recommendations more quickly. And obviously going over the transcript of our conversation, I see so many other avenues of questions to go down; I feel the need to reread the Booth chapters from this angle and see what I can learn from them now having done this first teen interview.

I found it more difficult than I expected to not just blurt out recommendations as we got further into the questions and her descriptions started matching up with Booth's appeal vocabulary! It was a fruitful exercise in understanding the difference between talking about and recommending books with friends, and practicing patience when listening to a teen patron and allowing them time and space to find the words for themselves or feel trapped by your first recommendation.

As mentioned above, I knew there was a chance also that as a high school senior, Jordan would not have much time for pleasure reading, and I tried to tailor both my later questions and my responses to her answers to make sure that she felt no judgment from me and would feel no pressure to make excuses for the fact that she doesn't have time to read (a guilt that is only compounded as one gets older). It

helped that she was mentioning books that I remembered reading during high school, and I was able to make jokes and related comments to offset any awkwardness she may have felt about saying the last book she liked was something assigned for class.

By nature of different patrons having different experiences with reading and genre preferences (and not to mention that new books arrive every week!), every reader interview I will experience in a professional situation will build on this experience and allow for continual restructuring in approach. Continually holding a mirror up to my methods and myself as the interviewer, in addition to following trends and keeping with new literature, is vital in order to growing as a creative problem-solver, effective communicator, and librarian engaging in critical practice.

Appendix A

Recommendations

In terms of actual recommendations, nonfiction is a hard genre to narrow down into; but Jordan's preference for narratives about people her own age, narratives that are short and fast-paced, and descriptive storytelling that allows the reader to feel like they're in the midst of the story, helped immediately guide what my recommendations would be. This pointed me towards narrative nonfiction, particularly true crime and armchair adventures; these are areas I feel relatively comfortable in when recommending for adult readers, so finding books of the same subject for and particularly about young adults (while avoiding the middle grade trap) certainly felt more challenging.

As a result of Jordan's interests, the book that came immediately to mind during our conversation was, of course, *The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater. It checks many of the boxes of interest Jordan expressed: it's about people her own age and has an emphasis on relatability; it is fast-paced and short; and the climactic scenes move quickly without much exposition but are still engaging. Since Jordan loved *In Cold Blood*, I'd feel comfortable going a bit older and recommending *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, which is so engaging that it has notoriously fooled many people into thinking it was fiction.

Rather than blogs or websites, I thought more of podcasts; with the rise of podcast popularity generally attributed to "Serial" and engaging, fast-paced nonfiction narratives. Jordan did mention that she liked true crime and *In Cold Blood*, so I would recommend the conversational, female-led "My Favorite Murder", as well as the investigative podcast "In The Dark"; for fast-paced narratives, the anthological storytelling "Snap Judgement" feels appropriate; and for relatable teen stories, the nostalgic comedy of "Mortified" is almost *too* relatable.

Appendix B

Transcript of interview (edited for clarity)

- Do you have any genres that you like to read? What's your go-to subject that you like to read for fun?
 - Now that I'm older, it's definitely changed. Now that I've grown up a little bit, I definitely like just, like, nonfiction, I like knowing that what I'm reading is real. I find it much more engaging knowing that something happened in the world or to a person. It definitely changes.
- And when you read nonfiction, do you like reading about stories that happen to people your own age, older, things that happened in the past, things that happened more recently? Or do you just like all of it?
 - I definitely like being able to kind of relate, not too severely, but probably similar to my age, that's more interesting to me.
- What was the last book you read that you really liked, if you can think of one?
 - I usually only read for school and this year what we're reading for philosophy is so difficult. So probably last year. I really liked *The Great Gatsby*, which does not go into the nonfiction category at all. And *In Cold Blood*, I loved that one a lot.
- Can you think of a book that you read recently that you hated or seriously disliked?
 - Literally what we're reading in Philosophy right now. *The Trial*, and it's basically just a man who is deep in his unconscious man, he's going in and out of a dream-like state, which just makes it so confusing, you don't know what's real and what's not. It's just frustrating, because he doesn't react to things like a normal person, it's just frustrating to read about.
- When you're thinking about books you want to read, even though nonfiction tends to be maybe be a bit longer and full of description, do you still like reading things that are fast-paced and shorter, or do you like having a bigger book to sink your teeth into?
 - No, I definitely like short and fast-paced, because, I would say I have a pretty low attention span. I like whenever things are happening. But I like a lot of detail, I like feeling like I'm there, or being described to a lot.
- But it's engaging when you're being described to. You don't like a lot of set up?
 - Mm-hmm.
- And when you're reading, are there things you don't like seeing, like graphic violence? Are there things that would turn you off from a book if you knew it was in there, or are you kind of open to whatever?
 - I can't think of anything specific. When all they talk about is violence and it's just descriptions of action that's going on, I do like the slower parts. So when it's just nonstop, it's too much.
- So not like mobster nonfiction? [laughing]
 - Right.
- When you read books for school, obviously it varies on whether you like them or not, but you liked *The Great Gatsby*, do you tend to like the older novels or does it vary from book to book and assignment to assignment?

- It varies. It's harder for me to get into a book if it's like super old English or harder to read. Other than that, it's not an issue on whether it's older or newer.
- Do you prefer reading print or digitally?
 - Definitely prefer print.
- Does your school have a library in it?
 - Yes.
- And you guys have a public library nearby-ish?
 - Yes.
- What do you think of both or either? Do you have a preference?
 - Our school one, I like it a lot. It's big and nice. I don't go to our public library as much, but if I'm looking for something, I'll go to Half-Priced Books, since you can buy books used and much cheaper.
- And do you find that you talk to the librarians at your school a lot?
 - Yes, but it's usually about laptop issues. That's more of their job, because we have a class at school where you can be a library assistant. Half the time when I'm in there, it's students running it. It's fun that way, I like it.
- When you go to the library or HPB to pick out books, do you like to generally browse and wait for something to catch your eye, or are you usually headed to the nonfiction section or a particular part of it?
 - I generally just browse, there's never a specific place I go.
- I know you're reading a lot for class because it's your senior year of high school, but how do you find out about books you want to put on your reading list? Where do you go for recommendations? Do you get them from your parents, from your friends, places like Goodreads—books you want to read?
 - Mostly from my friends. I have a few friends who read a lot, so they'll always recommend me stuff, and we generally have the same interests. I like the same things they like for the most part. So that's always a reliable go-to.
- Do you have any great authors you've liked? It's obviously harder with nonfiction because they don't write series and often don't write more than one or two books.
 - Can't think of any.