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**What is « culture » according to librarians ? Is it evidence-based?**

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## ***Abstract***

*F. Fialkoff's article<sup>1</sup> has led us to wonder about the most widely borrowed novels in public libraries and how they are promoted. We analysed the best lending statistics in three libraries in Lorraine (North-East France) and tried to identify the most frequently borrowed novels. This project led us to exchange ideas with librarians. We would like to find out about their presuppositions and thus, know more about libraries because we will know more about librarians. This study compares how the librarians approach reading and how readers do. We would like to show the gap between the two representations.*

## **Introduction**

From a sociological standpoint, the job of the librarian can be defined by its intermediate position between the world of creation and the world of the users<sup>2</sup>. In France, librarians are closer to the realm of information than those they serve but still, they are not really part of it. From this analysis, we would expect that their professional skills depend on the knowledge of each world. That's partly the case for the production of information : because of the general knowledge expected from them, librarians know quite well what is published. They know the authors, the literary trends, the publishers, the literary criticism, etc. On the other hand, how much do they know about the real and potential users ? This knowledge is not necessary to become a librarian. This theme is not very obvious.

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<sup>1</sup> F. Fialkoff, « Where are the library Best « sellers » ? » in *Library Journal*, 15 april 2002, Vol. 127, n° 7, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> B. Seibel, *Au nom du livre*, Paris, BPI, 1988, p. 11.

This situation comes from the way French librarians legitimate their job. The « quality » of the collections appears as the first criterion to evaluate the collections. Some librarians define their job using this element even if others emphasize the relationship with the users<sup>3</sup>. This is not a judgement on the librarian's system of values. It offers an opportunity to compare it with some (real and potential) users' system of values. It would seem that sometimes, the librarians' job is based more on their system of values than on real knowledge of the readers. It's the sociologist's job to reveal that what the people think true, is in fact sometimes the result of their value judgements. This paper is part of a larger project with the aim of explaining to librarians that their choices and system of values have consequences on the people who come to the libraries<sup>4</sup>.

## **The study**

In order to show the gap between the librarians' system of values and those of the users, a study has been carried out on one aspect of the library's life. It could be the relationship between librarians and users or the users' feeling about architecture or anything else. However, the study is about the novels borrowed by adult users. Novels were chosen instead of documentaries because it was considered that the process of selecting novels is more based on value judgements. A documentary will be « good » because of its topicality, its qualities of popularisations, its illustrations, etc. The appreciation of a novel varies from one individual to another.

In the library collection, what are the most borrowed novels? What are the users more likely to choose? The study of the most borrowed novels allows a comparison of the systems of values of the librarians and the users. Librarians choose the books they purchase (or not) according to their values and the users borrow the novels (or not) according to their own values. The study of the most frequently borrowed novels make it possible to capture the opinion of a part of the users on the books the librarians choose for them.

The participants in the study<sup>5</sup> wanted to observe which novels were the most frequently borrowed between January and November 2002. In order to diversify our data, three French public libraries (Laxou, Nilvange and Toul in Lorraine) were selected. They are not small and not big places (between 500 and 1 000m<sup>2</sup>). They are located in middle-sized cities (between 8 000 and 17 000 inhabitants). Toul and Nilvange are cities and around them there are villages. People from the villages come to these libraries. On the other hand, Laxou is located near Nancy which is the heart of the whole area.

How were the data collected ? We used the software of the three libraries to see which novels were the most borrowed during the period (January-November 2002). In order to compare the success of each title and not the time during which one was able to borrow it, the following formula was calculated for each title:

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<sup>3</sup> For numerous examples, see A.-M. Bertrand, *Bibliothécaires face au public*, Paris, BPI, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. C. Poissenot, « Programme pour l'étude des déterminants interne de la fréquentation des bibliothèques », in Réjean Savard (dir.), *La formation et la recherche sur le marketing et la gestion de la qualité des bibliothèques*, Colloque satellite IFLA, Québec, 14-16 août 2001, München, K. G. Saur, pp. 69-86.

<sup>5</sup> A special thanks to library directors P. Bruthiaux, M. Colnot, F. Didier who accepted this study. And also, thanks to the students who helped me to achieve it.

$$\frac{\text{Number of loans}^*}{\text{Number of months the novel is available for loan}}$$

\*where the number loans is where each loan of a novel is for a period of one month.

Using this formula, the list of the ten most frequently borrowed novels was established in each library. The list used for this paper (see infra) is presented for each library by ranks of levels of success.

This paper now considers why this theme of the most widely borrowed novels is of no great interest to librarians. Then, it will examine the gap between the largest choices of the borrowers and the librarians' values.

### *Studying the most frequently borrowed novels : a strange idea*

Although the number of libraries has increased in the last twenty years in France, the most frequently borrowed novels have never been studied. The only article located has been written by a journalist<sup>6</sup> from a literary magazine. That's the reason why problems were encountered in obtaining data about the most widely borrowed novels. Library software doesn't give these results easily, since it would appear that the librarians didn't insist on this when they chose the software packages.

### *Why is librarianship not interested in the most frequently borrowed novels in France ? What values prevent this interest ?*

Librarians are viewed by the others (users or not, members of the Ministry of Culture) as members of the field of « culture<sup>7</sup> ». They agree with this definition themselves. In such a field, the « quality » of a novel doesn't depend on the number of books sold. For some librarians, even, success appears like a doubt on the quality of a text. On this matter, Harry Potter is a good example. The librarians' opinion tends to be less favourable since books about Harry Potter have become enormous best sellers. In this context, we understand why librarians aren't interested by the most frequently borrowed novels in their library. They leave it to the book's market to manage the significant trends in the readers' habits. In this way, A.-M. Bertrand, an influential author in the world of libraries in France, asserted, for example, that : « libraries don't manage stocks (of bolts or tins of ravioli), they build a collection supporting ideas, knowledge and creation<sup>8</sup> ». Librarians behave and think of themselves as members of the literary field. They try to establish literary values in order to judge the production of novels. The literary field tries to define itself as self-governing<sup>9</sup>. This means that only members of the field, holders of the legitimate power can judge what is good or not. Only their voice can be heard. Success is not a criterion of literary quality. If the literary judgement is not specific, there is no more distinction between professionals and the public. The definition is in opposition to the business world which proceeds less from a rejection of a book's business (that is partly the case) than a distrust about the attention the world demonstrates to the readers' tastes. The artistic field doesn't like trades of cultural objects and it doesn't like people who help define the nature of services offered. The business

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<sup>6</sup> P. Perrier, « Les bons emprunts » in *Lire*, septembre 2002, pp. 20-22.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of field is developed by P. Bourdieu. For example, see *Questions de sociologie*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1980, pp. 113-116.

<sup>8</sup> A.-M. Bertrand, *Les bibliothèques municipales*, Paris, Ed. du Cercle de la Librairie, 2002, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> That what shows P. Bourdieu about journalism (*Sur la télévision*, Paris, Liber/Le Seuil, 1996) or literary writing (*Les règles de l'art*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1992).

world tones down the boundary between the members of the literary field and the public. People are defined by their position on the fringe of the literary field. Librarians claim their membership to the literary field. For that, they have to express reserve with the citizens' tastes, even if they have to serve them ! The readers' tastes can be satisfied all the more since they are the same as the ones of the librarians.

The study of the most frequently borrowed novels is not very interesting for librarians because it is only based by definition on a very small number of novels. They build collections for the long term and on a large variety of books. The most frequently borrowed novels reduces this variety to a small list resulting from the readers' choices. In their mind, promoting the variety prevails over worrying about the construction of a list of references shared by a variety of readers.

The collective yearning of librarians to be part of the literary field goes with the attempt of building and sharing a system of values. Through the way they recruit staff, the subjects of their examinations, their professional literature, the mailing list and also the mutual observation of looking at the colleagues' collections ; the underlying mantra is about agreeing and reinforcing one's choices. For example, one of the three library directors in the study, was interested in the acquisitions made by his colleagues through the list of the most frequently borrowed books. This subject tends to put the presumed unity of the professionals' system of values to the test. The collective established fact of differences in the way of selecting books among librarians and the gap between the professionals' tastes and the tastes of the readers threatens this unity.

*The most widely borrowed novels: reading between librarians and users*

The librarians' caution about the most frequently borrowed novels becomes understandable when observing readers' choices. They are quite different from the librarians' preferences.

**The most frequently borrowed novels in LAXOU, NILVANGE and TOUL**

Libraries	Authors	Titles
<b>Laxou</b>	JACQ, Christian	La place de la vérité (T.4)
<b>Laxou</b>	LEVY, Marc	Où es-tu?
<b>Laxou</b>	FOLLETT, Ken	Code Zéro
<b>Laxou</b>	CORNWELL, Patricia	Dossier Benton
<b>Laxou</b>	CONNELLY, Michael	Wonderland Avenue
<b>Laxou</b>	MANDEL, Henning	Morts de la St Jean (les)
<b>Laxou</b>	CLARK, Mary HIGGINS	Ce soir, je veillerai sur toi
<b>Laxou</b>	CLARK, Mary HIGGINS	Toi que j'aimais tant
<b>Laxou</b>	FYFIELD, Frances	En pleine lumière
<b>Laxou</b>	RENDELL, Ruth	Sage comme une image
<b>Nilvange</b>	CLARK, Mary HIGGINS	Dans la rue où vit celle que j'aime
<b>Nilvange</b>	CONNELLY, Michael	Tout ce qui meurt
<b>Nilvange</b>	CORNWELL, Patricia	L'île des chiens
<b>Nilvange</b>	STEEL, Danielle	Voyage
<b>Nilvange</b>	LEVY, Marc	Où es-tu?
<b>Nilvange</b>	ADLER, Laure	A ce soir
<b>Nilvange</b>	REAH, Danuta	L'assassin du parc

<b>Nilvange</b>	STEEL, Danielle	Mamie Dan
<b>Nilvange</b>	CHENG, François	L'éternité n'est pas de trop
<b>Nilvange</b>	LIVESEY	Passé recomposé
<b>Toul</b>	WALKER, Elizabeth	Les fruits sauvages de la passion
<b>Toul</b>	GRIMES, Martha	L'inconnue de la crique
<b>Toul</b>	TABACHNIK, Maud	Le cinquième jour
<b>Toul</b>	BOOTH, Stephen	Black dog
<b>Toul</b>	BOTTI, Laurent	La nuit du verseau
<b>Toul</b>	PLAIN, Belva	La tentation de l'oubli
<b>Toul</b>	AVRIL, Nicole	Moi, Dora Maar
<b>Toul</b>	BENSON, Stéphanie	Une chauve-souris dans le grenier
<b>Toul</b>	JAPP, Andréa H.	Le ventre des lucioles
<b>Toul</b>	BEAUMAN, Sally	La valse des mensonges

The characteristics of the most frequently borrowed books reveal what the culture of their borrowers is. It indicates the « culture » of a large number of the users. This « culture » is not dominant because of a lack of legitimacy given by an institution, but it is widely spread among the users in libraries. In this « culture » the novels from English speaking countries triumph. Among the list of best borrowed novels, two thirds of the titles have been written by authors from these countries. It is obvious that this cultural origin is less present in the holdings of the libraries. This result shows that our French culture is evolving by an importation of features from England and America. Such an observation confirms certain results about other subjects like music<sup>10</sup>, movies, gastronomy and so on. A large part of our population chooses foreign references through its practices. In novels from English speaking countries, they find ideas or stories that are much more interesting than in French ones. The defence of the « French exception » comes more from directors of cultural facilities than from their users. Here, we see the problem of French writers in communicating with French readers in general. Perhaps this success of English speaking novels is partly based on French taste for detective novels satisfied by English speaking authors. They know how to write regularly and create an expectation with heroes presented over and over again in the books. Moreover, English speaking authors in the list have written many titles. They can be identified by the kind of novels they write (e.g. Mary Higgins Clark, Daniele Steel). Thus the users choose an author they already know, knowing they will probably like the book. They choose something that will satisfy their reading habits<sup>11</sup>.

Readers and librarians don't agree about the marketing success and media coverage of novels and their authors. Seventeen titles among the list of the most frequently borrowed novels in the three libraries, appear in the Best sellers list of *Livres-Hebdo* (a professional magazine often read by librarians). This result indicates that readers choose their books among the best sellers<sup>12</sup>. These novels often have a better media coverage. Their marketing has repercussions on loans in libraries. Part of the reading demand in libraries is characterised by this general

<sup>10</sup> For example, near 40% of the French market of music is about the international variety.

<sup>11</sup> That's what shows the following study : L. Yu, A. O'Brien, "A practical typology of adult fiction borrowers based on their reading habits" in *Journal of Information Science*, vol. 25, n°1, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> This trend is more best sellers oriented than in a Japanese library in 1994. Three of the best sellers of the year 1993 were in the list of the ten best loans. See Y. Eki, « Best-selling books and reservations » in *Toshokan Zasshi*, t. 88, n°3, March 1994.

movement towards a small number of novels. This movement is made up of a mixture of the strategies of publishers and book sellers, literary critics in the press and the personal and collective judgements of the readers. Since library users have a short-term approach to culture within the library, they push the librarians to have the same approach. In this context, the library doesn't appear like a mediator between « quality » publishing production and the public. Its role is reduced to distributing books promoted by others than itself. Its « cultural » function of prescription which is so important for librarians tends to disappear. The library is not seen as a powerful member of the literary field. The librarians' reluctance<sup>13</sup> in offering multiple copies of best sellers appears as an attempt to protect part of their power. This comes up against the wishes of an important part of the users : they prefer to give up libraries<sup>14</sup> and use bookshops. This facility prefers to lose of part of its users than giving up its specific power in cultural field.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that, in France, a large gap exists between the uses and representations of the collection by librarians and users. It could be larger by non users, which were not included in the study. Librarians transmit a sign to the library through the books they purchase. The social construction of a hierarchy among publishing production is perceived by users. Those who share it tend to appreciate and be faithful to libraries. Others stay out. This split can partly explain why libraries attract mostly middle and upper classes.

More specifically, the study has shown that there is a gap among the users themselves. The librarians don't increase the value of the novels constituting the best loans. The users are not exactly what the librarians would wish them to be. So it's a big dilemma : Should the public adapt to the collections or the collections to the public ? We find something that D. Lahary<sup>15</sup> explains about librarian's profession : it can be « fundamentally seen in two ways. Should the collection or the public come first ? Should the document or users come first ? ».

Comparing the users' tastes in reading novels and the collection of novels in the libraries, it appears that what the librarians call "culture" is not shared by users (and probably by the non users). It demonstrates that promoting the "culture" is more a project than a service that is "evidence-based".

If libraries wanted to be appropriated by the population, they could use best sellers to show to users and to people that the facility recognises the users. This place is almost ours because our borrowing (personal and collective) creates the « users' voice » which is accepted by the library. Good relations between the users and the library supposes the public recognition of the users.

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<sup>13</sup> That's not the case everywhere, neither in France nor in other countries. An article (N. Van Tiggelen, « 'Herkenbaar en leerzaam, maar soms gaat het veel te ver': leesgeschiedenis van een informatieve topper. 'Recognisable and instructive, but sometimes it goes too far': the reading history of an educational success story » in *BibliotheekBlad*, t. 4, n°13, 30 Jun 2000, p.16-17) related the example of the Breda public library. It was proposing not less than 16 copies of *Men come from Mars, Women from Venus*.

<sup>14</sup> This argument is used by A. Yamamoto (« Comprehensive study on multiple copies in the public library » in *Toshokan-Kai*, t. 54, n°1, may 2002) to legitimate multiple copies.

<sup>15</sup> D. Lahary, « Métier, as-tu du ♥ ? » in *BIBLIOTHÈQUE(s)*, janvier 2003, n°7, p. 75.