

## Revamping and Rethinking Popular Reading at an Academic Library

Many people think of academic libraries as physical (or virtual) spaces and collections maintained for the purpose of patrons acquiring professional knowledge and practicing scholastic research skills. Academic libraries have much more to offer patrons, as is evident by the diversity of programs and resources increasingly offered by college and university libraries. Popular or leisure reading collections can serve as an important function of academic libraries, which also meet patrons' needs and interests outside of research and homework completion.

Academic libraries serve multiple functions and, to some extent, also act as public libraries to many patrons. Consider, for example, the low likelihood that a university student will visit her public library for leisure reading or programming when her academic library is readily available on campus (and likely a critical stop in her weekly schedule). Academic librarians have many wonderful opportunities to support visiting patrons' interests, personal and professional growth, literacy, and socioemotional development at their libraries.

Studies suggest that students find value in leisure reading and find that it promotes empathy, reduces stress, and can help them to develop professional and communication skills (Watson, 2016). Furthermore, by offering patrons of academic libraries easy access to leisure books, we encourage them to visit and become more familiar with library services and resources overall.

### Out with the Old

In Fall 2023, I began managing the Popular Reading collection at East Carolina University's Joyner Library. A couple of years had passed since our Popular Reading books had received much attention

in terms of new title selection, publicizing, or weeding. The then-stagnating collection held 591 titles and consisted predominately of dated fiction titles by established bookstore favorite authors of the previous decade including James Patterson, David Baldacci, and Patricia Cornwell. The collection also contained a few nonfiction titles, including biographies of former political candidates and cookbooks with covers boasting the names of network television chefs.

While some of these titles may have triggered a higher circulation at a public library, our patrons, predominately students in their early 20's, showed lukewarm interest. When I first began working with the collection, less than 20% of the titles had been used during the previous 6 months.

To improve and develop the collection, I first eliminated low-circulating and older titles. At Joyner Library, our Popular Reading collection consists of titles on loan from a vendor, so eliminating unwanted titles simply entailed contacting the vendor and arranging the returns. For each returned title, we received vendor credit for a new book of our choosing from the catalog available to us.

### Seeking Suggestions

After weeding roughly a quarter of the titles in the collection based on their age and lack of use, I began to choose titles by analyzing circulation of previous titles and genres, reading best seller lists, and acquiring suggestions via digital as well as virtual title request methods.

I experienced some success engaging patron feedback via a physical suggestion box placed on a shelf within the collection. However, patrons were most inclined to offer suggestions online. In order to solicit feedback virtually, I created an anonymous

Qualtrics survey with fields for titles, authors, and general comments. I initially sent the survey to Academic Library Services faculty and staff as well as to library student employees. Every few months, I have continued to remind students and employees of this suggestion link, which I keep live so patrons may suggest titles, authors, or genres at any time. The link also includes a multiple-response option for a variety of topics, such as “African American Interests, Topics, and Authors,” and “Self Help, Psychology, and Personal Growth.”

In total, I have received dozens of responses, many of which have been requests for multiple titles as well as for genres, including graphic novels, to which I would have been unlikely to have given much attention if it were not for the survey.

### Advertising and Acquiring

To draw attention to the Popular Reading collection, I advertised titles with posters placed near the shelves, hero images on the Joyner Library website, flyers highlighting new titles, and bookmarks with QR codes to the suggestion survey, and a departmental presentation about the collection. Each of these methods elicited renewed interest in the collection, and I have also experienced success in advertising the titles by having personal conversations with student and employees about their reading interests as well

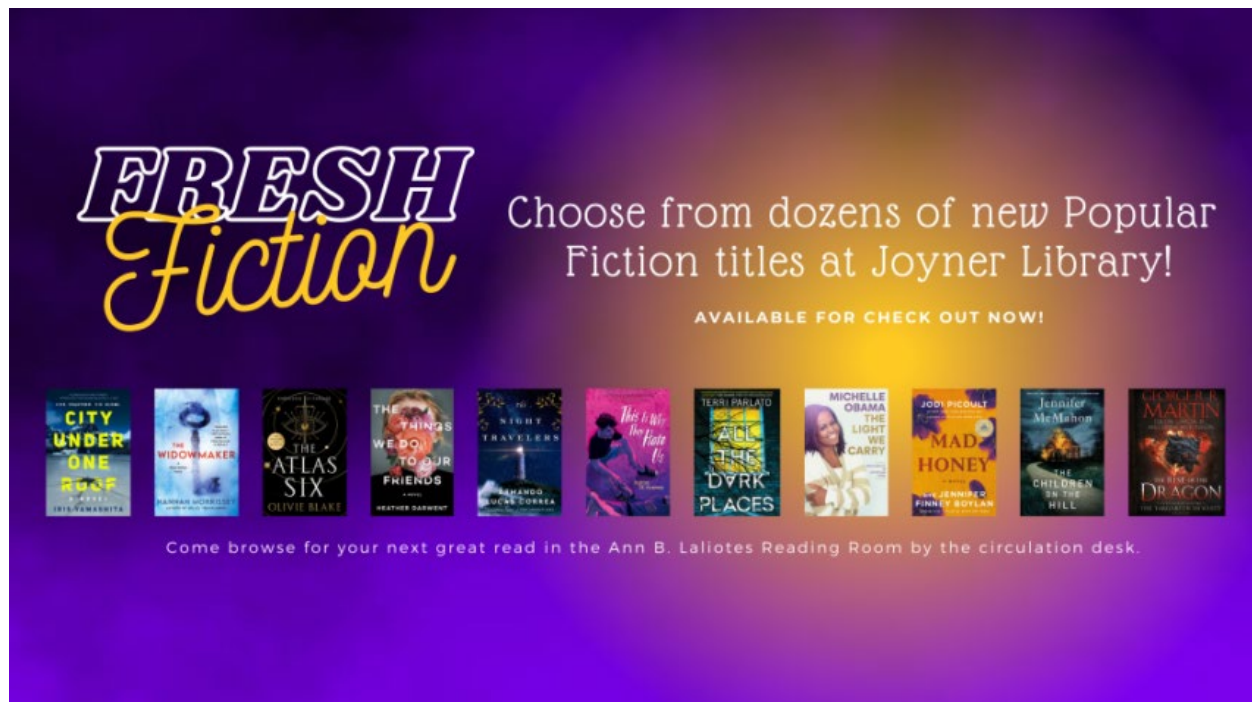
as having discussions about specific titles within the collection.

As with many other collections within the library, I believe Popular Reading collections are strongest when designed “by the people, for the people.” Though I consider the collection a perpetual work in progress, our Popular Reading titles currently much better reflect the interests and lives of our patrons.

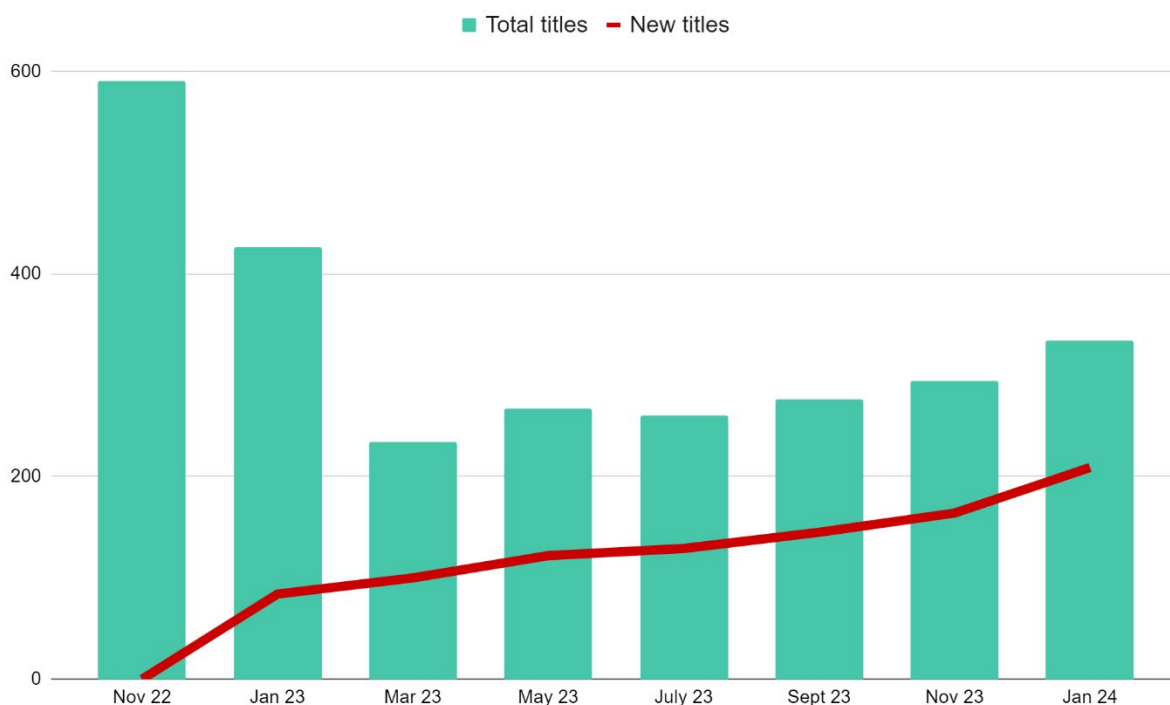
Soliciting suggestions and advertising titles have both greatly helped improve the collection, increasing interest and engagement. When ordering titles, I also do my best consider the interests of patrons who have not engaged with the survey or collection. Researching our student population demographics reminds me to include Latinx voices and characters so patrons are better able to empathize with and be inspired by narratives and authors which reflect our community. Attending faculty trainings and maintaining an awareness of student events reminds me of our patrons’ passion for equality with respect to LGBTQ+ issues and respect for neurodiversity, also allowing me to select titles accordingly.

### Current Collection

After making the initial, and more sweeping, changes to the Popular Reading collection, I have adopted a “slowly but surely” approach to ordering titles. Some months, I receive little feedback and see few avail-



A poster placed in the Popular Reading section to advertise new titles.



A graphic from a recent department presentation displays the number of Popular Reading collection titles and the number of newly acquired titles in the collection.

able new bestsellers that seem essential to add. Other months, several patrons reach out and request new titles, topics, or series, or there happen to be more new releases that seem to have the potential for high circulation. Currently, our Popular Reading collection is at 60% of its size at the commencement of revitalization, and I expect this number to grow over the coming year.

Despite the smaller size of the current collection, circulation reports reflect a 50-100% increase in the number of titles checked out each month when compared to January 2023. The number of titles checked out over a 6-month period averages 125 in the months following the collection makeover. Comparatively, about 100 titles were checked out within a 6-month period of pulling monthly statistics prior to revamping the collection.

The percentage of titles currently checked out each month ranges from 10-15% since revitalizing Popular Reading, compared with an average of 5% of titles currently checked out prior to my management of the collection. However, because the collection is smaller, I know these statistics alone do not necessarily reflect an increase in patron interest. I aim to keep title circulations high while growing the collection

in number, knowing this outcome would be a better indicator of success.

### Acknowledging Impediments

Regardless of my efforts, I acknowledge the impossibility of all patrons using the Popular Reading collection, suggestion box, or survey, and therefore I remain open to new tactics for outreach to address this limitation. In taking over the Popular Reading collection, my most frustrating hindrance has been the lack of availability of patron-requested titles from our vendor. Our vendor's options allow me to order approximately half of the titles specifically requested by patrons, and there are far fewer popular graphic novel titles than would be ideal for my readers.

In an effort to boost support for our student requests, I alerted our vendor. I also contacted other UNC school system libraries with leisure reading titles as well as a colleague at the University of Tennessee. In my discussions with seven other librarians, I found that each of the other libraries supplemented their popular collections with titles from additional vendors or worked with a different vendor.

As I continue to receive some requests I cannot fulfill via our vendor, I note them for discussion

## Title Spotlight

Please browse titles and check out newer and trending **titles on display in Gray Gallery today!**



A presentation slide displaying new fiction and non-fiction titles in Joyner Library's Popular Reading collection.

with the representative, hoping we will be offered a solution. In terms of request fulfillment, I pass suggestions for titles I cannot order along to liaison librarians according to subject so the titles can be accessed via our general collection if not housed within Popular Reading.

### Helpful Hints and Title Highlights

Over the past 18 months, our most highly circulating Popular Reading titles include *Spare* (memoir) by Prince Henry, Duke of Sussex; *The Hurricane Wars: A Novel* (fantasy) by Thea Guanzon; *Yellowface: A Novel* (satire) by R. F. Kuang; *The Professor* (mystery) by Lauren Nossett; *How to Sell a Haunted House* (horror) by Grady Hendrix; *Carolina Built: A Novel* (historical fiction) by Kianna Alexander; *How We Heal: Uncover Your Power and Set Yourself Free* (nonfiction, self-help) by Alexandra Elle.

I hope that some of my success with the Popular Reading collection can be duplicated at other libraries while some frustrations are avoided. My “word(s) for the wise” include: allow patrons to suggest titles virtually, periodically remind them to do so, have individual discussions about leisure reading, and keep an open mind when selecting titles. Young Adult titles, for example, should not be excluded from academic leisure reading collections if they are requested by patrons.

While I find the suggestion box and virtual title recommendation form useful in soliciting patron requests, I believe that engaging with patrons in person to have discussions about Popular Reading generates new and renewed interest in the collection. To attract additional attention to the collection, I plan to involve students by advertising events such as book talks and readers’ “meet and greet” social events. The events will be advertised in the library building and via email invitations to student library employees. These opportunities will have the potential not only to advertise the collection, but to support and connect student readers.

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### References

Watson, Erin M. “The Importance of Leisure Reading to Health Sciences Students: Results of a Survey.” *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 33, no. 1 (2016): 33–48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hir.12129>.