Sarah Morrison – Reader Profile and Journal
August 3, 2015

1. Introduction and Methodology

I was excited to choose the reader profile and journal as my final project for LIS 9382. My own reading habits, especially with regard to fiction, are not something I have actively analyzed before. As I will discuss below, this has been a particularly helpful process with regard to fiction, and my past frustrations with not being able to "get into" things that have been recommended to me.

As I have mentioned in class, I read very quickly. My Goodreads goal this year is to read one hundred books, and I am ahead of schedule. This means that I had a lot of books to choose from for my book journal. I decided to stay within the 2015 calendar year so I could use my private Goodreads account to track when I read the book and what rating I gave it at the time. When choosing the books to include in the journal, I decided to pick ones that I really enjoyed, both fiction and non-fiction. Though it would be helpful to look at what I do *not* enjoy, I usually do not continue reading something if it does not grab me. This mean that there were only a few books that I have read this year that I was ambivalent to or did not like (including two of the books I read for my horror genre assignment in this class). In order to be able to analyse the books for this project on the same scale, I went with books that I rated four or five stars after reading them. (It must be noted that one of the fiction books included in this project was from the genre assignment which was, at the time, a very pleasant surprise!) I counted the Dreamblood Duology by N.K. Jemisin (two books) and the Milkweed Triptych by Ian Tregillis (three books) as single units for the sake of analysis since they were conceptually a whole and I read them consecutively in a short period of time.

Once I chose my books, I undertook a quick "re-skim" to re-familiarize myself with the works. This was not a re-read, but my memory for details is not good and I wanted to be able to fully do each book justice, especially ones that I read earlier in 2015. Luckily, I often highlight a lot when reading non-fiction so I could go back and see what passages I found important at the time.

I decided to publish my book journal as a series of blog posts, located at http://www.sarahamorrison.net/book-journal/. My blog is important to me, and I write on there in a similar style to how I think. I do not find writing in journals a natural process for me – I was not someone who kept a journal as a child, and I usually write things out by hand when I'm fleshing out ideas, not to keep something for posterity. I also (correctly) predicted that this would be an iterative process and
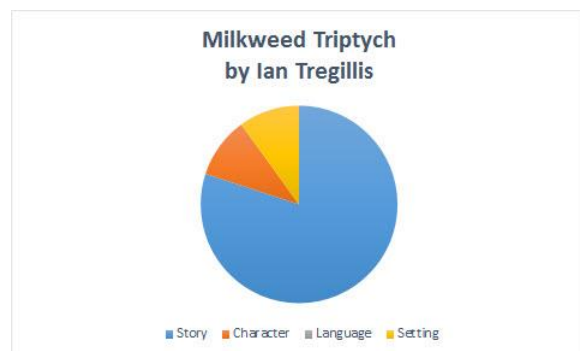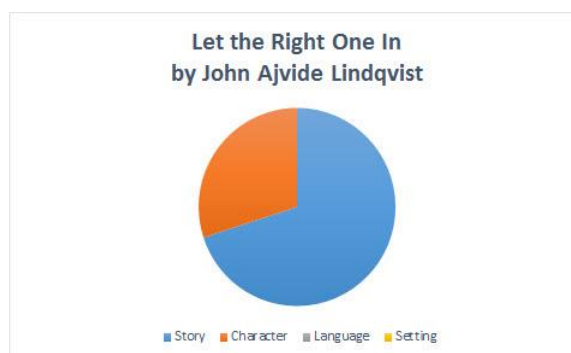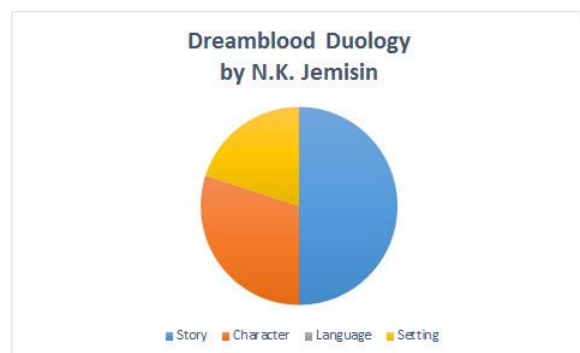
that I would revise my blog posts multiple times before publishing them. The blog format allowed for flexibility to build the entries as I re-skimmed and as I got more comfortable with the assignment. I also plan to make the project public on my website once the mark has been returned.

2. Appeal and Me

I have been upfront throughout the term that I am mostly drawn to non-fiction books, many of which fall outside of the narrative non-fiction type. This has been the case for many years. It is mainly due to the fact that those are just the type of books that interest me, but a part of it is, if I am honest, due to my frustrations with reading fiction. In the past, I would find isolated fiction series or books that I adored. I would try to read something else by the same author or in the same genre, though, and I would hate it. This was especially the case when trying to read the "classics" or "essentials" that I would be tasked with selling while with Indigo.

This project, and the course in general, has completely demystified what was happening. I would find books that were strong in appeal factors that resonated with me, and then landing on books that were heavier on other appeal factors (especially, in hindsight, language) that were not to my taste. Upon reflection, it is not a shock that story is the appeal element in fiction that catches me.

Dreamblood Duology
by N.K. Jemisin

Story Character Language Setting

Let the Right One In
by John Ajvide Lindqvist

Story Character Language Setting

Milkweed Triptych
by Ian Tregillis

Story Character Language Setting

Fiction Narrative Series

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Many of the books that are classified as literary classics seem to have a main appeal element of language, or feature it as one of their major secondary appeals. Story, for me, is at the opposite end of the spectrum from language. I do not want to be slowed down by flowery language – I want to be caught up into something that makes me stay up till 2 am to finish it. Looking back at some of the books in the past few years that have been ones I enjoyed (such as *Warbreaker* by Brandon Sanderson), they were ones that had a high story appeal. When I tried to read *The Way of Kings* by Sanderson I lost interest quickly. Knowing what I do now, language and setting were the appeal factors that were at the forefront, and they did not work for me.

It is not surprising, then, that story is the main appeal element (at 50% or higher) for all three of the fiction narrative series I read. In the case of the Milkweed Triptych, story is not only the appeal factor that stood out the most, but was the main factor of enjoyment for me in the book. It was not lost on me that, when describing Tregillis' storytelling skills I was starting to sound like readers who enjoy language-appeal books when describing a particularly well-crafted turn of phrase.

When starting to analyze my non-fiction choices, I put a lot of thought into how the appeal factors would map onto books that were non-narrative non-fiction. For me, the story appeal element translates into books that contain an argument that the author is building toward. They make me keep reading, faster and faster, to see how the author will tie all the pieces together into a "slam-dunk" argument. With regard to character, these works are about a specific people or persons as opposed to an argument or general concept. I also found that, if I saw myself reflected into the work, I also became a sort of "character" that I related to. Setting maps similarly, where works are about a particular place and time. Language is the most interesting, however, in that it manifests for me in non-narrative non-fiction very specifically as a love of books about certain subjects written in a very "academic" tone that some find boring or hard to read.
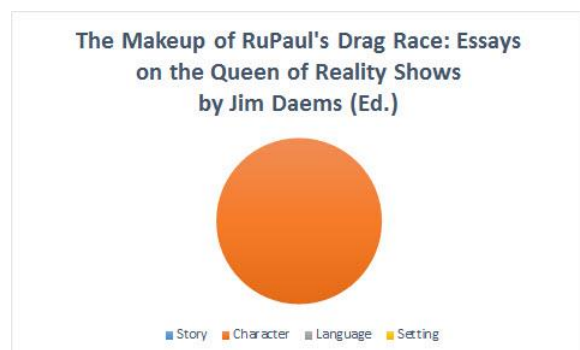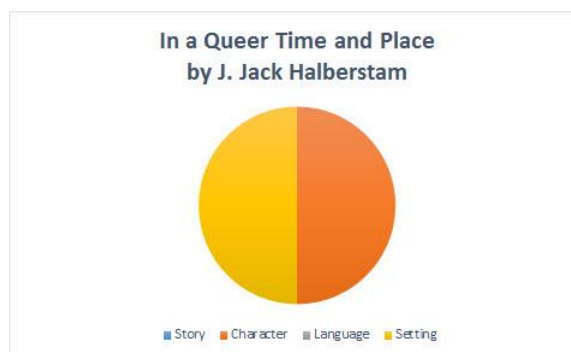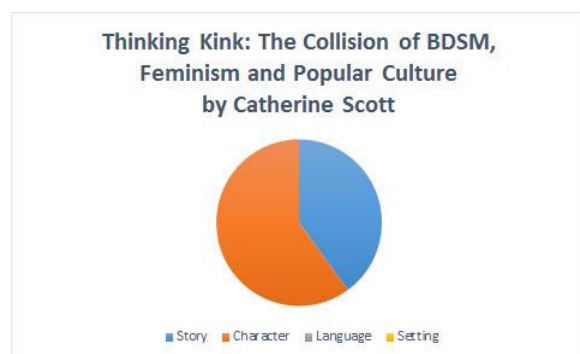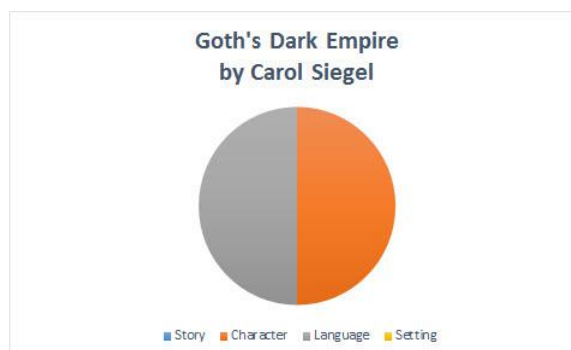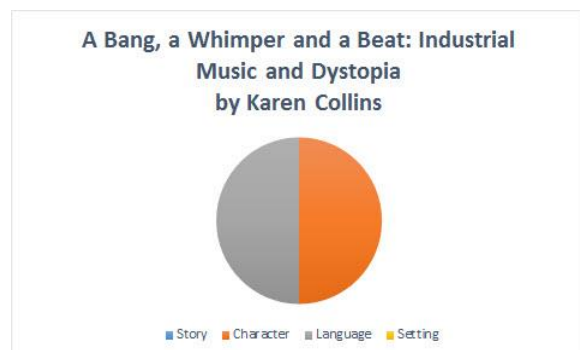
Looking at my non-fiction choices, the element of character is the most common, being the majority element in six out of ten books[1] and a minor element in three out of ten books. This reflects both the fact that I am drawn to seeking out books about people or groups I am invested in (such as my love of Trent Reznor leading me to read *Goth's Dark Empire*) but also that I enjoy works that I relate to in some way. *Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights* is not about a specific person, but about a

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[1] Please note that numbers will add up to more than ten as some books had a 50/50 split in appeal elements, and thus both would be counted in my majority counts.

group of people that includes myself. I related strongly to the work and could see myself in the situations and arguments that

Pollitt put forth.

A Bang, a Whimper and a Beat: Industrial Music and Dystopia by Karen Collins

Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Goth's Dark Empire by Carol Siegel

Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Thinking Kink: The Collision of BDSM, Feminism and Popular Culture by Catherine Scott

Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

In a Queer Time and Place by J. Jack Halberstam

Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race: Essays on the Queen of Reality Shows by Jim Daems (Ed.)

Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada by Emily van der Meulen, Ely M. Durisin, and Victoria Love (Eds.)

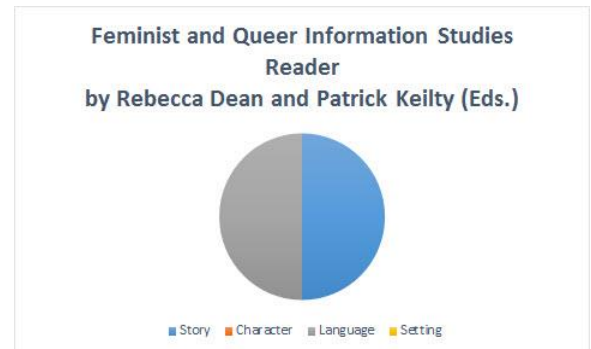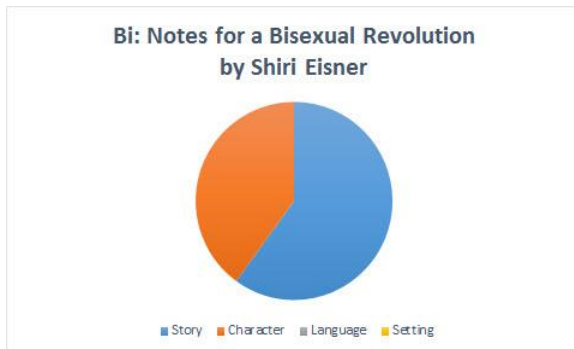Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Non-fiction Books with Character as a Major Appeal Element

Story was a majority appeal element for three out of ten works and a minor appeal factor for two out of ten works.

Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution and *Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights* both had rousing arguments that the authors were

building toward. I had the same feeling when reading them as I did when frantically reading faster and faster to finish a story-

heavy fiction book. The story appeal in the *Feminist and Queer Information Studies Reader* was not working toward one,
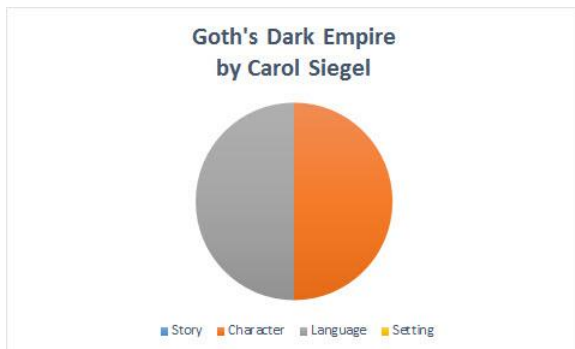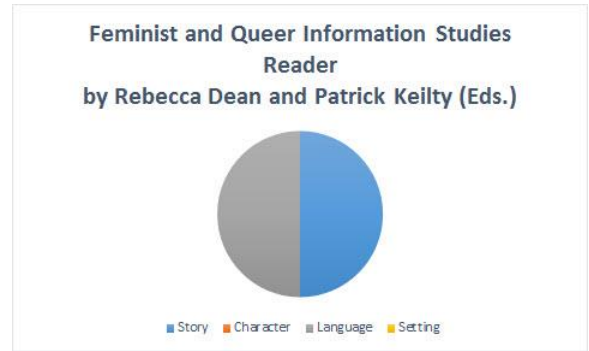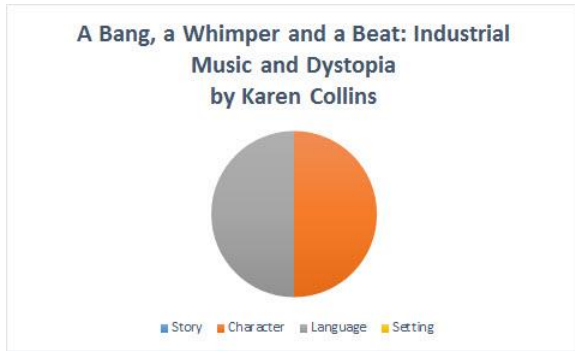
larger argument but each chapter had its own build. I wanted to keep reading in order to see the various ways the contributors would approach the merging of queer studies and LIS.

Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution
by Shiri Eisner

■ Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Feminist and Queer Information Studies Reader
by Rebecca Dean and Patrick Keilty (Eds.)

■ Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Pro: Reclaiming Abortion Rights
by Katha Pollitt

■ Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Non-fiction Books with Story as a Major Appeal Element

Much like with fiction, the setting appeal factor was present but not in a strong way. It was a minor element for two books out of ten and split 50/50 with character in a third. The largest surprise for me, however, was the presence of language as an appeal element in three out of ten works (where it was split half way with character in two instances and story in the third). Not only was it present *at all* but it was also half of my enjoyment of these works! This can be attributed to the *type* of language that is being remarked upon. In fiction, the language appeal element is focusing on a "literary" style – detail-rich, flowery, and dense. Flipped into non-narrative non-fiction, this becomes "academic" writing – which, I am positive, some would also describe with similar terms. In a non-narrative non-fiction context, however, I enjoy this manifestation in some instances in a way that I absolutely do not in fiction. These were all books that were discussing topics close to my heart (industrial music, queer studies and LIS, and the Trent Reznor) but approached them in an academic format, which appealed to me and contributed greatly to my enjoyment of the works.

A Bang, a Whimper and a Beat: Industrial Music and Dystopia by Karen Collins

■ Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Feminist and Queer Information Studies Reader by Rebecca Dean and Patrick Keilty (Eds.)

■ Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Goth's Dark Empire by Carol Siegel

■ Story ■ Character ■ Language ■ Setting

Non-fiction Books with Language as a Major Appeal Element

3. Me as a Reader

A major take away for me from this is that I cannot approach my non-fiction and fiction reading habits in exactly the same way. When reading fiction, story is the key to my enjoyment, trumping character and setting. Language is a sure-fire way to make me *not* be interested in the work as I cannot get engaged with the plot quickly enough. I am hopeful that this will alleviate some of my frustrations with what seemed to be a totally random pattern of liking some fiction but disliking others. I feel much more confident now in identifying early in the process whether a book will grab me, and using clues from reviews as to whether it will be a good fit. It now makes sense why someone as well-read as me has not read most of the works on the "essential classics to read" lists, and there is no shame in this – they just did not appeal to my preferred appeal elements.

My non-fiction choices were interesting because they did not play out in the same way as fiction. Story is an element that is important, but it is not *the* overarching appeal factor like it is for my fiction choices. Character actually shows up more frequently, which might reflect that it is a broader definition in my understanding for non-narrative non-fiction than it is for the narrative styles. The presence of language was shocking because of my aversion to it in my fiction choices. Upon reflection, though, I have heard people describe works written in an "academic" style in the same way (and with the same

distaste) as I describe "literary" works. I have gained a bit of sympathy for my language fiction loving colleagues, as I feel similarly to a dense academic work about industrial music the same way they might feel about a dense literary work about 19th century England.

The importance of secondary appeal factors came up during my discussion of *Let the Right One In.* The presence of sex, violence, blood, and disturbing things is something that peaks my interest and would potentially be enough to get me to overlook a work that is not a story-heavy as my normal choices. Looking at some of the other things I have read over the year that did not make it into the project, as well as my voracious consumption of fanfiction, this is an element that cannot be overlooked.

4. Conclusions

This project, and the course as a whole, has been a fascinating glimpse into understanding why I do what I do. I am a big fan of self-reflection, and I do not like not understanding things about myself. My troubled relationship with fiction, as I have put it before, has bothered me for a while. It is this personal process of understanding my own appeal likes and dislikes, and the realization that what works for me in one style of work may be different in another, which can be applied to help others. I absolutely cannot be the only person who has been frustrated by the seeming incomprehensibility of liking one fantasy book and disliking another. This frustration can be a major impediment to people getting full enjoyment out of reading for pleasure, and librarians can absolutely use the non-judgmental language of appeal to help readers navigate finding a reading experience that works for them.

I wish these concepts were taught to booksellers. Many of us were truly invested in putting the right book into the customer's hands. We did our best, and stumbled on some of these ideas organically, but we could have been so much *better* at our jobs (and at making our customers satisfied) if we had been able to speak to them in the language of appeal. Librarians should not, in my opinion, be afraid of this. Bookstores and libraries can coexist, as long as librarians can market our full skill set to the public. This includes readers' advisory services that would still go beyond what can be done in a retail environment, even one well-trained in appeal. I do not think that these are trade secrets that should not be shared. If our goal is truly facilitating great reader experiences, then encouraging booksellers to be better is not at odds with this.

I also feel that these skills can translate into future work that is not in readers' advisory, or even in public libraries. Many of my jobs, such as my co-op with PwC Canada, have involved working back and forth with clients to understand their needs and ensure they are getting the best value out of the transaction. I was able to take the reference interview skills I learned in the program and apply them, along with my retail sales training, toward developing strategies to best engage in these conversations. The readers' advisory interview is yet another toolkit of transferable skills that I can draw upon when engaging in a service interaction. While I might not be discussing what book they want to next read, the empathy and listening skills that are needed for a successful readers' advisory interaction are crucial. The reference interview, a sales interaction, and the readers' advisory conversation are all different takes on a core concept – that of engaging with your client, listening to them, understanding what they need, and working to help them find or achieve it. Through understanding my own challenges with isolating a great reading experience, I can better work to understand and work with the challenges of my clients.