Genre Soup

"Genreblending" in Popular Fiction

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According to Joyce Saricks (2011), we in the library field "like definitions" (p. 19). It makes sense—after all, categories make patron service smoother. Many of us are also fans of genre fiction: we read romance, mysteries, and fantasy. However, we are citizens of a postmodern world, and our popular culture and popular novels reflect this changing landscape: they don't always fit neatly into any particular genre slot. We've stereotyped nearly every genre available to us, from science fiction to romance, westerns to literary fiction, but it is a little harder to pigeonhole genre-blended works. After all, how does one stereotype something that is more a pastiche of styles than one single genre? And, perhaps most importantly for collection development and patron services—where does one *shelve* such a book?

Dominic Strinati (1993), writing in the early 1990s, argues that "Postmodern popular culture is a culture *sans fronieres*, outside history" (p. 362). If our popular culture is shedding its frontiers to "encapsulate, accentuate, and reflect" the "confusions and distortions" of modern life (Strinati, 1993, p. 361), it is no wonder that our popular literatures have followed suit. And follow they have: television programs, movies, novels, and even music all participate in the blending of genres and styles and the creation of new, postmodern identities (or artistic forms) for this new cultural landscape. Indeed, Cynthia Orr (2013), describing author Michael Chabon's

take on genreblending, says: “By writing in the ‘borderlands’ between genres, he [Chabon] believes writers are able to experiment with conventions and push genres forward” (p. 37). Blending genres fits perfectly into our postmodern world, in which nothing is quite what it seems and “anything can be turned into a … reference or quotation in its eclectic play of styles, simulations and surfaces” (Strianti, 1993, p. 361). Perhaps this is one of the reasons genre-blended works are “one of the largest trends” in publishing, which, according to Orr (2013), “makes organizing the volumes in” *Genreflecting* “impossible except as a very basic guideline” (p. 37).

If it is nearly impossible to categorize books in a work such as *Genreflecting*, shelving and retrieval will become more difficult—as will working with patrons, not all of whom may want to read today’s all-new, genre-blended versions of their favorite genres. Indeed, we’re renovating our warhorse genres: Diana Tixier Herald (2013) writes that “it is perhaps through genreblending that Westerns will survive and even thrive in the future” (p. 210). While *I* am not much of a Western fan, I love Joss Whedon’s one-season television show *Firefly* and its companion movie, *Serenity*—both of which are set in a Wild West many years in the future and in galaxies far away from ours. Herald (2013) writes that “Genreblending has become a norm rather than an exception,” and says that things once “considered to be eccentric variations are now commonplace” (p. 221), at least in Westerns. Ingeborg Hoesterey (1999) writes that “the critical category of genre is alive and well and changing in surprising ways” (p. 78), which is perhaps the best way to understand the evolution of today’s Westerns. Indeed, while it is now de rigueur for Westerns to include some sort of genreblended element, Westerns have

branched out to include representations of women and people of color, among other previously marginalized subjects (Herald, 2013, p. 207).

While genreblending is an obvious presence in Westerns, it is present in many genres, from Charlaine Harris's Sookie Stackhouse murder mysteries (with vampires, telepaths, and shapeshifters) to paranormal romance. Science fiction and fantasy have long included elements of other genres; however, they, too, are showing more traces of genreblending. As Michaelangelo Matos (2011, August 25), Hoesterey (1999), and Strinati (1993) all note, some form of genreblending has cropped up in multiple areas, not just in literature; in fact, Matos (2011) and Hoesterey (1999) make special note of the blending of disparate elements in contemporary music, and, of course, genreblending is rather commonplace in movies and television. It isn't just *Firefly* that dabbles in more than one genre at a time. Thus, even if one's patrons prefer movies and television to novels, one will likely be working with genreblended materials.

As *Genreflecting* itself makes clear (Orr, 2013, p. 37), genreblending has made categorization of materials increasingly difficult. This itself seems to be part of a postmodern movement towards the muddying of genre, or the "'paradox of postmodern genre' … describes … the very conceptualization [sic] of a generic order in which transgression and change are virtually preprogrammed due to the inevitable historicity of any such discursive convention" (Hoesterey, 1999, p. 78). It seems highly unlikely that most genre authors and creators (since genreblending doesn't just happen in literature) think in such overly lofty terms. However, one can certainly argue that today's genreblends have "historicity": they are, after all, products of

our postmodern age. It seems quite likely that, by the time I reach the job market in six months or a year, there will be even *more* genreblended works on our shelves.

Because of the wide variety of genreblending, it is almost impossible to offer the sort of collection strategies and readers' services interview possibilities that one can set down for more "settled" genres, such as romance (or the traditional Western). It is difficult to know what the "strongest" genre in a given book may be, which will in turn influence where it is shelved—and how easily patrons can find it. For instance, Harris's *Dead Until Dark*, the first of her Sookie Stackhouse novels, can be seen as a fantasy, a paranormal romance, or a murder mystery. I tend to read it as a murder mystery with supernatural elements (and sex scenes). As a patron I rather expect to find the Sookie Stackhouse books shelved in mystery—but, in truth, I have no idea if this is simply because my old library had them in mystery, or because I would have felt either way that the mystery was the strongest element. Similarly, I would probably be confused by a Romance novel shelved among the Westerns—even though, as Herald (2013) tells us, there are many cross-genre Romance Westerns (pp. 222-223). It will be interesting to watch the evolution of library shelving, as genres become increasingly flexible and cross-pollination increasingly common; however, at this time, I think that a library's best bet is to see where other libraries (or even bookstores!) shelve a given book, and, always, to proceed with caution when deicing upon placement of a genreblended book.

Similarly, it is difficult to suggest concrete strategies for collection development and readers' interviews, beyond those strategies already in place for genre collections. As far as I know, there are no journals devoted to genreblended fiction; I am unsure if this would be possible, and I doubt it will happen—unless it becomes an important facet of study in literature

departments, in which case the journals will have little to do with popular literature collections in libraries anyway. On the other hand, when conducting a reader's interview, I think that some of the more basic concerns present with other genres—from violence to sex—will continue to be very important. In addition to these, however, we will need to try to nose out how a given reader feels about reading a book with science fiction or fantasy elements. Is a reader of traditional Westerns going to enjoy *Firefly* or a steampunk novel set in a revisioning of the old West? Or will she or he prefer to stick with old friends and those who write like them? Will a mystery fan be amenable to reading a paranormal mystery…or will he or she prefer Rhys Bowen or Robert Galbraith instead? While there is no apparent stereotype of genreblended works—perhaps because they're simply too diverse to pigeonhole—many of them utilize elements of heavily stereotyped fictions, from romance to Western. I think, therefore, that we should show the same care we would use when discussing a romance novel when investigating the various elements of a genreblended work. After all, it is very important that we not turn off a potential reader to a given work by denigrating its particular genre characteristics—and it's also important that our patrons feel safe with their respective selections. It wouldn't do to suggest *Dead Until Dark* to someone who absolutely hates vampire fiction, even if they typically love murder mysteries with female leads.

Genreblended works are a literature of our age, a postmodern re-imagining of genre to fit a postmodern world. They are also a literary Wild West, a world filled with pitfalls and problems and exciting new frontiers. We might like definitions, as Saricks (2011, p. 19) comments, but genreblending throws us a curveball—one that will likely become increasingly common for some time to come. Their placement will likely evolve. In the meantime, we as

librarians must be wary of our presentation of genreblended works—we should take care not to disparage their genre elements, and should try to help patrons make positive connections. They might be a wild frontier of postmodernist styles, but genreblended novels are also a literature of our time, filled with possibilities for readers willing to give them a try.

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