

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# Public Libraries as Shapers of a Youth Canon

*Les biblioteques públiques com a modeladores d'un cànon juvenil*

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## Abstract

We start with the hypothesis that the library is a fundamental institution in the creation of the youth literary canon. To uphold it, we analyze the process of constructing this canon by examining the titles that are selected from the library, how they are selected and who selects them. The methodology involved the preparation of two surveys and the analysis of 209 responses from public libraries in Spain and 162 from their reading clubs, 19 of youth literature. The data identifies, classifies, analyzes, and compares the titles of the works selected in public libraries: on the one hand, the books that the user chooses to borrow and, on the other hand, those that are read in reading clubs. In the case of the reading clubs, there is a mediation process that we describe and analyze based on the responses to the surveys. The results demonstrate the importance of mediation carried out by librarians and club coordinators to ensure that users engage in diverse and quality reading.

## Keywords

reading, library, youth literature, literary saga.

## Resum

Partim de la hipòtesi que la biblioteca és una institució fonamental en la creació del cànon literari juvenil. Per a ratificar-la, analitzem el procés de construcció d'aquest cànon analitzant els títols que se seleccionen des de la biblioteca, com es trien i qui ho fa. La metodologia utilitzada ha sigut l'elaboració de dues enquestes i l'anàlisi de 209 respostes de biblioteques públiques d'Espanya i 162 dels seus clubs de lectura, 19 de literatura juvenil. Les dades identifiquen, classifiquen, analitzen i comparen els títols d'obres seleccionades a les biblioteques públiques: d'una banda, els llibres que l'usuari tria en préstec i, per una altra, aquells que es llegeixen en els clubs de lectura. En el cas del club de lectura, hi ha una mediació que descrivim i analitzem a partir de les respostes de les enquestes. Els resultats demostren la importància de la mediació realitzada pels bibliotecaris i els responsables dels clubs per a aconseguir que els usuaris facin lectures diverses i de qualitat.

## Paraules clau

lectura, biblioteca, literatura juvenil, saga literària.

## Recommended citation

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## 1. Introduction

What titles of young adult literature are highly regarded in the public library from the librarian's perspective? Do the results differ from those read in reading clubs? Does the selection by librarians influence the construction of the youth literary canon? Do the titles valued in the library become part of the academic canon?

Lluçh's literature review (2023) concludes that there is no single literary canon, nor a selection based on a single criterion, but rather constant processes of text selection. However, the research shows a lack of verifiable data on how policymakers, institutional leaders, editors, librarians, critics, or readers select works or award-winning texts; on how they develop criteria for evaluating books recommended by professional critics; compile lists of recommended readings; or prescribe readings in virtual social media. In this context, the non-academic canon is identified as those works not traditionally selected by academia and that have not been a primary focus of study. The question is whether these are the most demanded in libraries. This article is a part of broader research aimed at identifying the agents, institutions, or companies that create this canon, understanding the process they follow in selecting titles, and specifying the list of titles that comprise it. The research has been carried out within the framework of the research project "The non-academic literary canon: construction, characteristics, responsible, selection and reception in virtual public epitexts" PID2019-10587RB-I00. R+D+i projects within the framework of the State Programs, knowledge generation and scientific and technological strengthening of the R+D+i system Oriented to the Challenges of Society, of the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain in the call for 2019.

We start with the hypothesis that the recommended and read works in public libraries are an important part of this canon and, therefore, we identify these institutions as a fundamental part of this process. To confirm this hypothesis, we have analyzed the results of 209 responses from public libraries in Spain and 162 from their reading clubs, 19 of which focused on young adult literature. The results will demonstrate the importance of mediation in encouraging users to engage in diverse and quality reading.

The data we present identify, classify, analyze, and compare the titles of selected works in public libraries: when a user chooses a title to borrow, and when they are read in reading clubs. In this case, there is mediation that we describe and analyze.

## 2. Context, Aims, and Methodology

We present the results of research conducted between December 2021 and May 2022. These are the responses to two surveys sent to the responsible individuals of public libraries in Spain and the coordinators of their reading clubs. The aim of the research is to understand what works of young adult literature are read and valued by adolescent readers and compare them with the titles from reading clubs. In the case of the clubs,

the objective has been expanded, as there was a selection process, to analyze how it is conducted; also, what system is followed to select readings, who performs it, and based on what criteria. The overall result will help understand how public libraries shape the youth literary canon.

In December 2021, two surveys were launched by the Subdirector General of Library Coordination of the Ministry of Culture and Sports. The sending through the Subdirector General of Library Coordination has the advantage in that the survey reaches the library managers through an official channel, which should motivate a higher response rate, although for the researchers, it has the disadvantage of not directly controlling the distribution process. Therefore, during the first months of 2022, after realizing that the number of responses was not as expected and that the territorial distribution was not homogeneous, promotional actions were carried out through various channels (ANABAD, IweTel, and FESABID) and the directors of the regional public library networks. They were closed at the end of May 2022, and 209 responses were received from public libraries and 162 from reading clubs. We thank all these organizations for their support in distributing the surveys.

We believe that this number of responses is sufficient to establish in a general manner the role of public libraries and reading clubs in the creation of the youth reading canon, but, although there are responses from practically all the autonomous communities, the territorial distribution continues to be uneven. If we look at population criteria (2021 Census), both in the case of libraries and in that of reading clubs, there is an underrepresentation of the most populated autonomous communities, especially the Community of Madrid and Andalusia and, to a lesser extent, the Valencian Community, Catalonia and the Basque Country. This unequal result means that we cannot assess the promotion of readings in each autonomous community, nor in languages other than Spanish.

In this study, we analyze the responses that the 209 librarians gave to the questions: "E2.1. Now think about the narrative works published in recent years aimed at a young adult readership that are highly regarded in your library. Write down the titles of these works (1 title is sufficient, but you can write up to a maximum of 3)." The survey included similar questions about poetry and theater, but the result was anecdotal, so we focused exclusively on the responses to narrative. These were then contrasted with the results of the question "C6. Think about the works that have been read in the reading club in recent years. Write down the titles of those works (up to a maximum of 10) that you remember have been most liked by the club members," answered by 19 coordinators of young adult book clubs.

Thus, Section 3 presents the results of the most read and valued titles by readers, i.e., those that users borrow from libraries without mediation, and Section 5 the titles read in reading clubs. Section 4 analyzes the functioning of reading clubs and the book selection process, the responsible individuals, and the criteria. Finally, the book results from both cases are compared, considering the genre, the most repeated readings, the books that are part of sagas or series, the language in which they are written, and the theme. The results will show the effects of mediation and the characteristics of the titles that make up the youth literary canon in the two circuits proposed by the library.

### 3. Results of the Most Highly Valued Titles

The initial hypothesis for the analysis of the most valued books by readers is that the results may reveal a pattern regarding the works highlighted by a young adult reader in the library environment. The most significant results provide information on the literary genre, the number of most mentioned books, the percentages published in series format, the year of publication, and the theme.

#### 3.1. Regarding the Genre

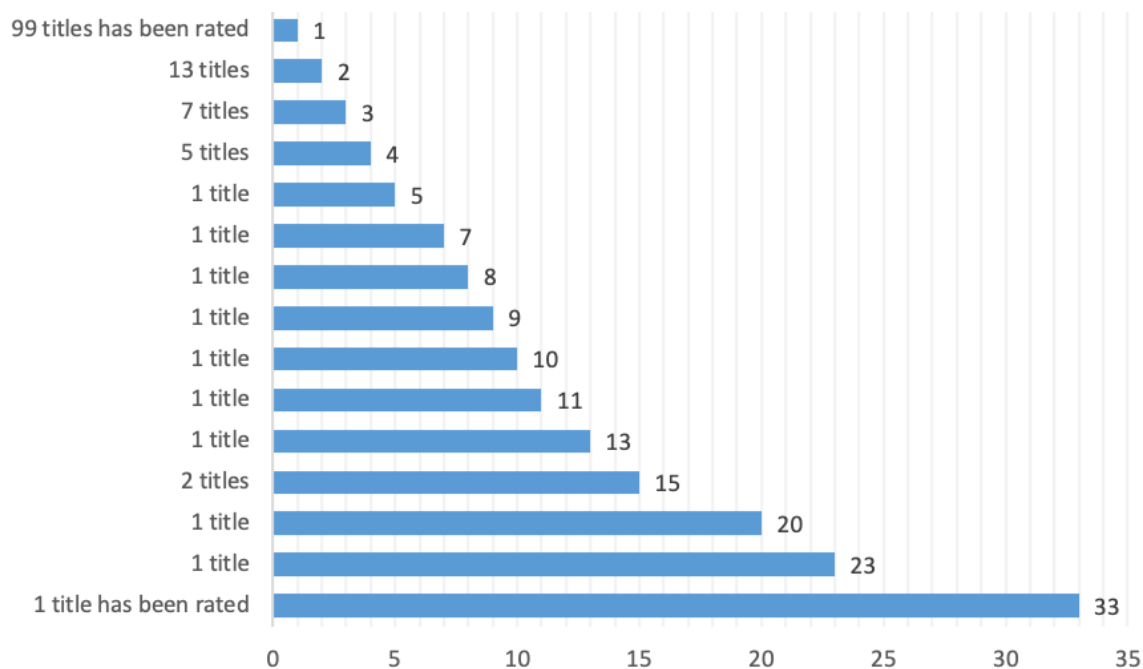
The predominant genre is fiction: out of the 525 books mentioned, 324 titles were fiction; therefore, fiction overwhelmingly accounts for the majority of reading recommendations. While 14.4 % of libraries do not provide any notable titles of adult poetry, this percentage rises to 51.7 % when it comes to young adult poetry. In this case, justifications such as "it's difficult, I wouldn't know, poetry is rarely requested" frequently appeared. In a few cases, libraries explained that they did not have a collection of poetry for young adults.

A similar situation occurs with theater, a genre in which interest in reading declines significantly, both among adult and young readers. In this case, only 36.8 % of libraries highlighted at least one theatrical work for adults, a percentage that dropped to 29.2 % when it comes to young adult theater.

#### 3.2. About Repetitions

From this section onwards, only the responses regarding the 324 fiction titles are analyzed, as those for poetry and theater were negligible. To identify which titles are repeated in the librarians' responses, a comparison of the totals was conducted, resulting in 187 repetitions. Specifically, out of the 324 titles, one title was cited 33 times (10.11 %), while 99 titles were cited only once. Figure 1 illustrates the number of occurrences of the same title.

Figure 1. Number of times a title has been mentioned in the surveys



The graph shows a certain homogeneity in the responses, as one title was highlighted 33 times; the same happened with two other titles, with 23 and 20 occurrences respectively. Next, two other titles were valued 15 times, and the following two, 11 and 10 times. In other words, 7 titles were chosen on 125 occasions out of the 324 reading recommendations.

### 3.3. Repeated Titles

Specifically detailing the repetitions, Table 1 shows the most repeated titles in the responses from the 324 libraries:

Table 1. Titles most highlighted by librarians.

<b>Highlighted Title</b>	<b>Repetitions</b>
<i>Harry Potter</i>	33
<i>Diarios de Greg</i>	23
Work by Laura Gallego	20
Work by Blue Jeans	15
<i>Los futbolísimos</i>	15
<i>Invisible</i>	13
<i>After</i>	11
<i>Mentira / Verdad / Miedo</i>	10
<i>Percy Jackson</i>	9
<i>Wonder: la lección de August</i>	8
<i>Isadora Moon</i>	7
<i>La diversión de Martina</i>	5
<i>Naruto, La puerta de los tres cerrojos, Crepúsculo, Los juegos del hambre, La Reina Roja</i>	4
<i>Cazadores de sombras, Geronimo Stilton, Boulevard, Una mujer en la garganta, Los compas, Anna Kadabra y Diarios de Nikki</i>	3

The first conclusion is that in most cases, these are not strict novelties, but rather works published a few years ago, even if they have been reissued. If the analysis focuses on the publication years of books mentioned more than 5 times, Table 2 shows some results that need to be discussed. The most mentioned ones correspond to titles published in the form of a saga or series (see 3.4). In this case, the publication year of the first title and the closing year of the saga or series are used; if it continues to the present day, the legend "up to the present day" appears.

Table 2. Publication year of the most highlighted titles by librarians

<b>Highlighted Title</b>	<b>Publication Year</b>	<b>Repetitions</b>
<i>Harry Potter</i>	1998–2008	33
<i>Diarios de Greg</i>	2007 up to the present day	23
Work by Laura Gallego	<i>Finis mundi</i> (2000) <i>Memorias de Idhun</i> (2004)	20
Work by Blue Jeans	<i>Canciones para Paula</i> (2009)	15
<i>Los futbolísimos</i>	2013 up to the present day	15
<i>Invisible</i>	2020	13
<i>After</i>	2014 (1 title of the series)	11
<i>Mentira / Verdad / Miedo</i>	2015 (1 title of the series)	10
<i>Percy Jackson</i>	2006 (1 title of the series)	9
<i>Wonder: La lección de August</i>	2014	8
<i>Isadora Moon</i>	2017 (1 title of the series)	7
<i>La diversión de Martina</i>	2017 (1 title of the series)	5

The second conclusion is that all titles (except the first ones from the Harry Potter series) have been published from 2007 onwards. Five out of the 12 titles in the first decade of this century; 7 in the second. Therefore, all the titles valued are relatively new, as in the case of series, they are continued to be published, expanded, or reissued.

### 3.4. Series and Sagas

The publication of trilogies or sagas is common in readings for children and young adults. Greenlee, Monson, Taylor (1996, 216) begin their study with the assertion: "Juvenile formula series books are big business," and conclude that for parents, educators, and librarians, it is an easy recommendation to make. Merga, Mat Roni (2017, 621), in a study based on reader responses, conclude that series offer an attractive familiarity and allow the reader to deeply connect with the characters as they progress through internal and external journeys across numerous books. For mediators, they are reliable because they offer comparable experiences.

Discursively, we define a series as a set of books that repeat a similar narrative pattern, focused on a simple plot, whose events are organized in a quinary sequence, meaning they follow a scheme that starts with an initial situation disrupted by the onset of a conflict that develops until its resolution and the return to the initial equilibrium, and are populated by the same characters. In the case of sagas aimed at young people, the discourse organizes events linearly and follows the chronological order of the initiation story with a structure similar to that proposed by Propp (1972) for fairy tales; more precisely, they follow the proposal of Vogler (2002), first published in 1998, based on an adaptation of Propp's model. These stories propose multiple subplots and are populated by supporting characters that enrich the fictional world constructed by the narrative (Lluch, Sanz, 2021, 54-58). The most highlighted ones are of this type, and only deviations from this model are *Invisible* (13 repetitions) and *Wonder* (8).

Table 3. Most repeated books that are sagas or series

Highlighted Title	Type of repetition	Repetitions
<i>Harry Potter</i>	Saga	33
<i>Diarios de Greg</i>	Series	23
Work by Laura Gallego	Work	20
Work by Blue Jeans	Work	15
<i>Los futbolísimos</i>	Series	15
<i>After</i>	Saga	11
<i>Mentira / Verdad / Miedo</i>	Trilogy	10
<i>Percy Jackson</i>	Series	9
<i>Isadora Moon</i>	Series	7
<i>La diversión de Martina</i>	Series	5
<i>Naruto</i>	Series	4
<i>La puerta de los tres cerrojos</i>	Series	4
<i>Crepúsculo</i>	Saga	4
<i>Los juegos del hambre</i>	Saga	4
<i>La reina roja</i>	Trilogy	4
<i>Cazadores de sombras, Geronimo Stilton, Boulevard,</i>	Series	3
<i>Los compas, Anna Kadabra, Diarios de Nikki</i>		

In the list, alongside specific titles, references to "work by Laura Gallego" / "work by Blue Jeans" were included since in both cases librarians had identified them as such.

These responses are justified by the fact that both authors have constructed a recognizable fictional universe (Lluch, Sanz, 2021, 54-58) appreciated by their readers, who, moreover, become reader-followers and establish ongoing communication with social media and virtual spaces associated with the authors. This fictional universe is created from diverse books, but they share enough common characteristics (theme, plot, characterization, narrative structures, and discursive style) to be identified as a unity.

### 3.5. About the Language of Publication

The number of works originally written in English (but read in Spanish) is notable. Therefore, translation occupies the top positions of the most recommended titles (Table 4). It is worth noting the absolute dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture and the absence of translated works from other cultures.

On the other hand, only 7 works written in Catalan were highlighted, of which 3 were translations. No books in Basque or Galician were mentioned. However, for the interpretation of this data, the distribution of responses by autonomous communities must be taken into account.

Table 4. Original language of the most repeated

Highlighted Title	Language	Repetitions
<i>Harry Potter, Diarios de Greg, After, Percy Jackson, Wonder, Isadora Moon</i>	English	91
Work by Laura Gallego, <i>Blue Jeans, Los futbolísimos, Invisible, Mentira / Verdad / Miedo, La diversión de Martina</i>	Spanish	78

### 3.6. About the Theme

For the classification of books by themes, we could not exclusively follow the subjects used by libraries, as subjects are not assigned to literature, only to non-fiction works. For children, in recent years, more and more libraries have been assigning subjects to literature, but there is no single and agreed-upon list of subject headings. They usually place them under number 8 (literature) in the Dewey Decimal Classification system. In this case, we use the proposal by Gómez-Díaz and García-Rodríguez (2022) based on the classification scheme of the Torrente Ballester Municipal Library in Salamanca, which distinguishes between love, mystery and horror, animals, adaptations of classics, humor, adventures, historical, fantasy, and real life.

However, Table 5 shows a thematic reduction where, for example, adaptations of classics, historical novels, love, or animals do not appear.

Table 5. Themes of the most highlighted titles by librarians

Highlighted Title	Theme	Repetitions
<i>Harry Potter, Work by Laura Gallego, Percy Jackson, Isadora Moon</i>	Fantasy	69
<i>Diarios de Greg, La diversión de Martina</i>	Humor	39
<i>Invisible, Mentira / Verdad / Miedo, Wonder: la lección de August</i>	Realistic	31
Work by <i>Blue Jeans, After</i>	Emotions	15
<i>Los futbolísimos</i>	Mistery	15

## 4. The Mediation Process of Reading Clubs

Nineteen youth in-person reading clubs responded to the survey, and before analyzing the titles they had read and liked the most, it seemed interesting to describe what they are and how they work since, in this case, the selection and evaluation of the title are not done by the library user who usually, without assistance, chooses, reads, and evaluates the book. In this case, there is a mediation process that is important to analyze and understand.

### 4.1. A Radiography of Reading Clubs

The results of the surveys, taken by 19 club coordinators, provide a detailed description of the functioning of those in which the youth reader participates.

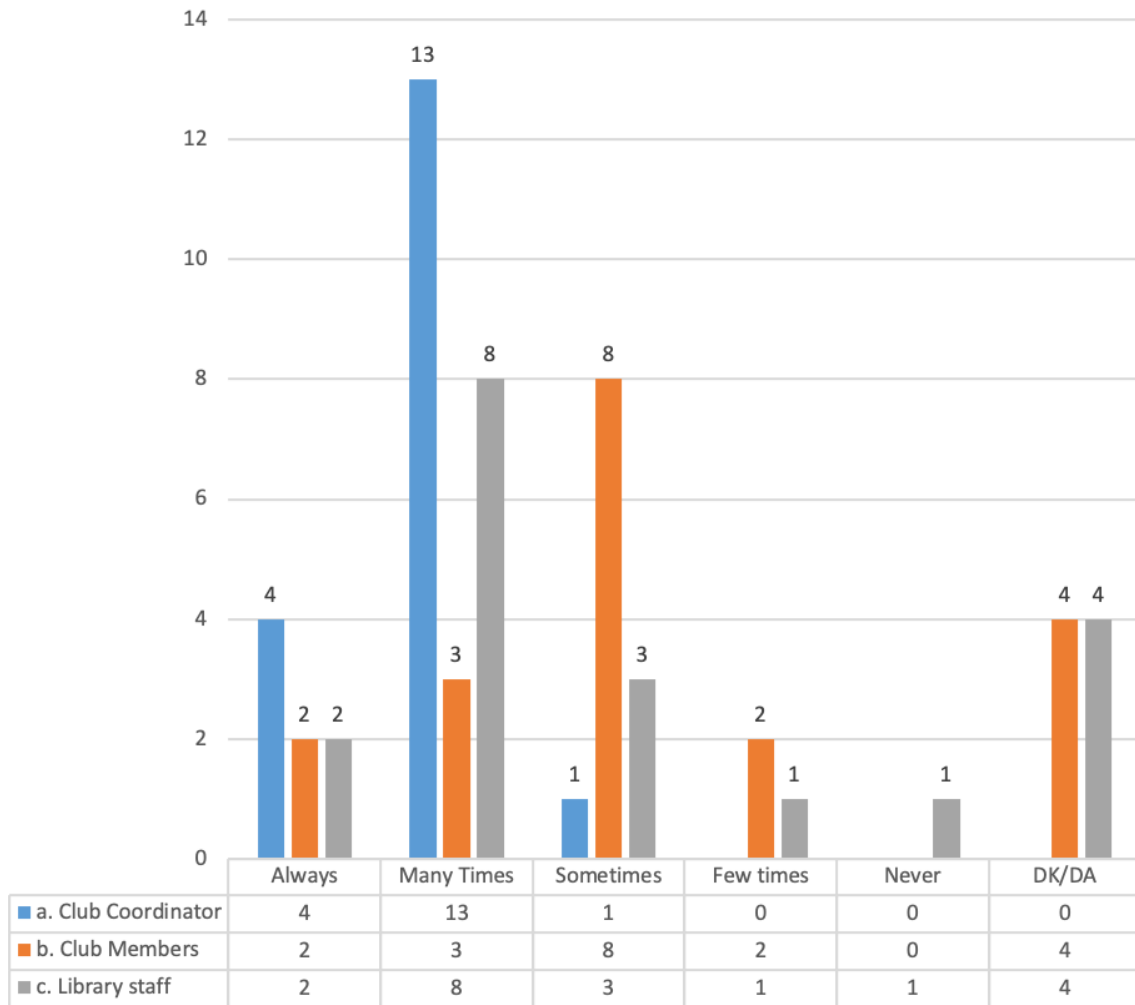
- The club coordinator in 11 cases is library staff; in 4 cases, it's the same individuals from the club organizing it, and in 4 cases, it's managed by volunteer staff.
- These are well-established clubs, as 50% have been operating between 6 and 9 years; the oldest has been running for 20 years, and the most recent for one year.
- The number of participants varies, ranging from 5 individuals (the smallest) to 30 (the largest).
- Regarding participant types, 7 out of the 19 clubs are described as mixed clubs, as they involve individuals of different ages.
- Meetings are held regularly: 11 of the clubs meet once a month or less, 6 meet bi-weekly, and only 2 meet weekly.
- The frequency of book reading per year varies, although the most common is between 6 and 8 books annually.

### 4.2. The Book Selection Criteria

The responses regarding the book selection process, who performs the selection, or the criteria used are very similar. In most clubs (16/19), the individuals responsible for proposing the reading titles were the library or the club coordinator; in two cases, it was the club members who selected them, and in one case, they read award-winning books or those that had been provided by the coordinating center of libraries. Figure 2 shows that, predominantly, the selection of readings is done by the club coordination and library staff.

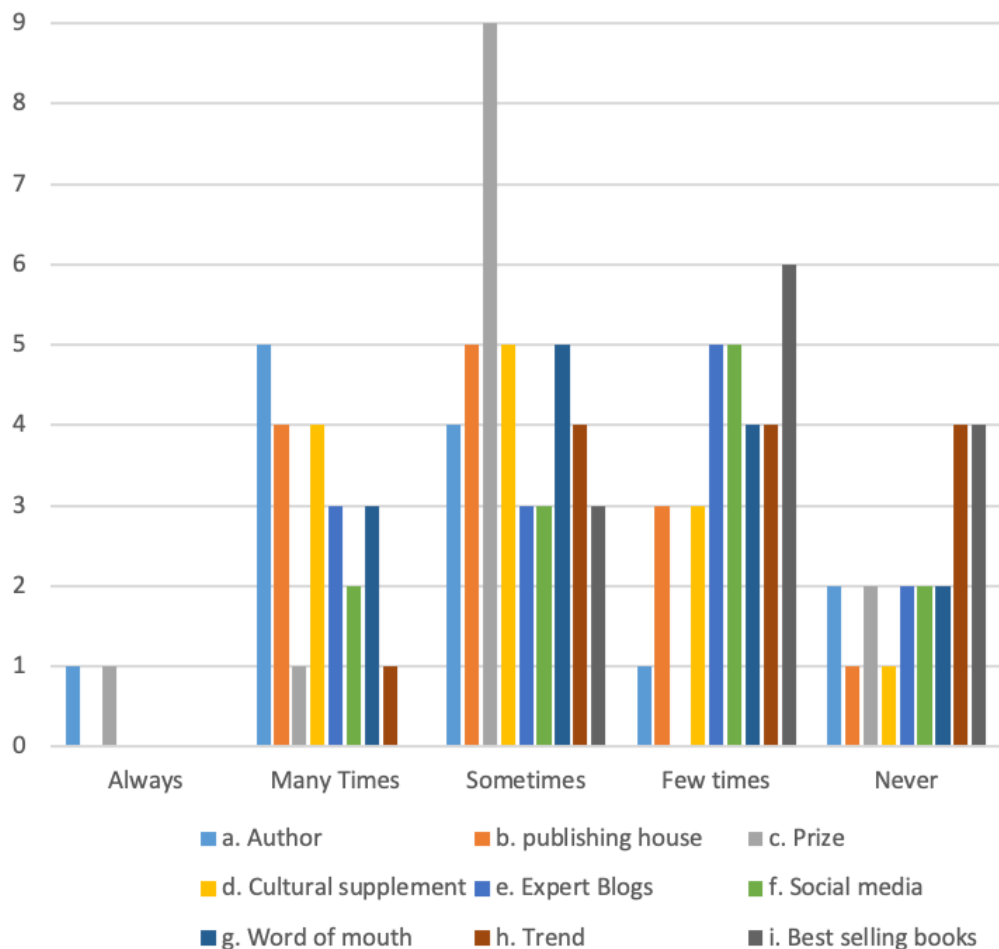


Figure 2. Selection managers in reading clubs



However, the book selection criteria that coordinators use vary, as seen in Figure 3. The question presented 9 possible responses, with multiple choice. The main proposals were as follows: the prestige of the author, the collection, or the publisher, literary awards, the opinion of experts in specialized magazines or literary supplements, or the evaluation expressed in blogs, evaluation on social media, informal evaluation of the works, such as word of mouth, or whether it is a work that has been "trendy" or has been part of lists of most read or best-selling works.

Figure 3. Selection criteria in reading clubs



The results clearly indicate that the criteria used for selecting the titles are: literary awards (11/19), the author’s prestige (10/19), the prestige of the collection or the publisher, and the opinion of experts in magazines or literary supplements (9/19). In contrast, a majority responded that they never, or only sometimes, use the criterion that the work is a bestseller (13/19); 12 that it is on the bestseller lists; and 11 that it is informally valued, i.e., through word of mouth, is also a rarely used criterion.

Therefore, reading clubs choose the books they will read based on traditional criteria such as awards, the author’s or publisher’s prestige, and the opinion of experts in traditional media such as literary supplements. Conversely, they never or seldom use the criterion of valuing the book on social media.

## 5. The Most Valued Books in the Reading Club

The response to question “C6. Think about the works that have been read in the reading club in recent years. Write down the titles of those works (up to a maximum of 10) that you remember have been most enjoyed by the club members” yielded 61 works, and unlike the results of the question analyzed in Section 3, only one book was repeated twice and one response failed to provide a specific title.

Therefore, the total number of selected books forming the corpus of analysis was 58 titles. Next, we analyzed the genre, language, and theme in order to compare with the results in Section 3.

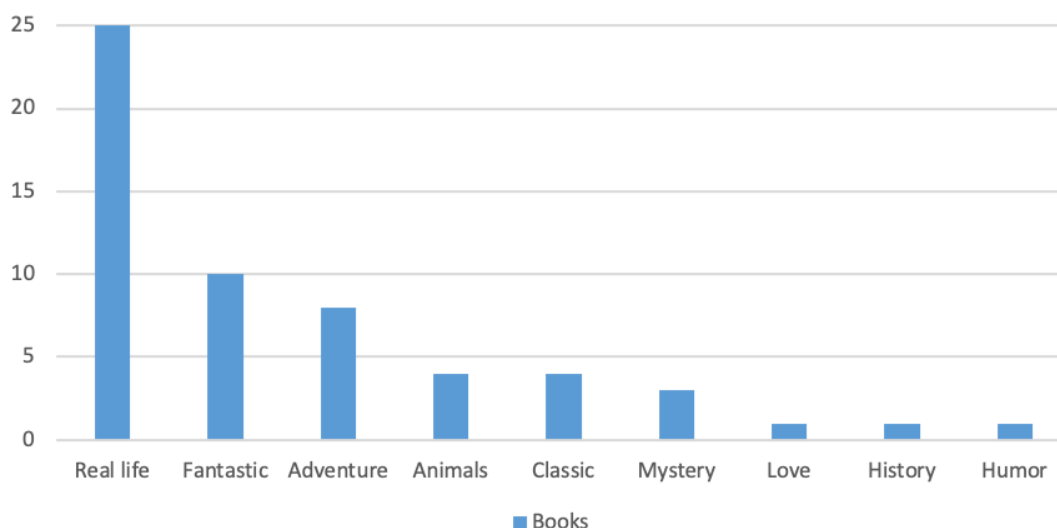
## 5.1. Regarding Genre, Theme, and Language of the Books

In the survey of the reading clubs coordinators, when asked if they read works of the same genre, 12 responded negatively and 7 responded positively, with narrative predominating or being the only genre. Only one club responded that it was a thematic reading club, meaning they always read works of a similar theme (in this specific case, classic literature).

However, the analysis of the responses shows that the coordinators' perception is inconsistent with the answers, considering that there is greater diversity than when users choose works without mediation, narrative continues to be the dominant genre with 35/58; the other two genres being picture books (13/58) and comics (6/58).

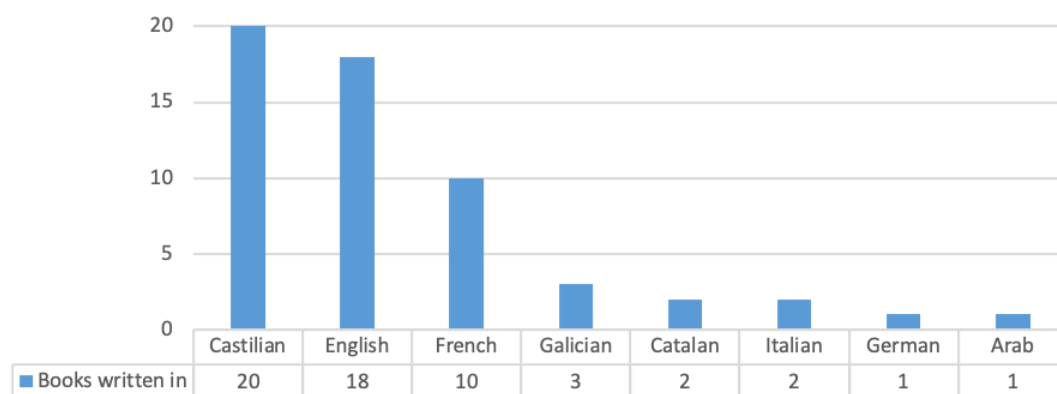
However, the themes of these books do show greater diversity (Figure 4). Themes focusing on real life (26/58), fantasy (10/58), and adventures (8/58) stand out. Classics (4/59) do appear as valued readings in the clubs.

Figure 4. Themes of the reading clubs



The same holds true in the case of the language in which the works are originally written. Although English (18/58) and Spanish (20/58) are the majority languages, there is a presence of works originally written in French (10/58) or in co-official languages such as Galician and Catalan (5/58).

Figure 5. The original language of the books read in the reading clubs



## 5.2. The Awards and the Reviews

One of the results from section 4.2. indicates that the criteria used for selecting titles include literary awards (11/19), the prestige of the author (10/19), and the opinion of experts in magazines or literary supplements (9/19). Conversely, they never or rarely consider the fact that the work is valued by experts in blogs (11/19), if they do at all. The results of the analysis of the selected books coincide with this.

Regarding the selection of books made by the coordinators of the reading clubs, 19 out of 58 have either received an award, been a finalist, or the author has been awarded on other occasions; 23 out of 58 may be considered classics of world literature or children's and young adult literature. Therefore, 42 books (out of the 58 selected) are acknowledged either because their author or the work has received an award or because they have become part of the classics category. Additionally, 48 books have a review in the usual places that highlight this type of reading.

## 6. Conclusions and Discussion

The importance of mediation is the focus of research such as that by Almeida (2019), which concludes by assessing the role of the librarian as a specialized agent in reader mediation whose intervention is especially necessary in the case of younger and less mature readers. Azuara and Castellano (2019) give an example of the different practices of reading mediation, considering them as a communication tool with users whose objective is to recommend and promote readings beyond commercial novelties based on various criteria, such as the relevance of the work in a literary movement.

The results of this research show its importance in a common practice of libraries: reading clubs. In this regard mediation carried out in reading clubs leads to readings beyond narrative fiction, current events, or the language in which they are written.

Margaret Merga and Saiyidi Mat Roni (2017, 617) stated that, although self-selection of reading materials is considered an essential component to encourage greater participation, little was known about how it is done. The results of this study demonstrate the importance of mediation in the library environment, not only for a better quality of readings but also for the diversity of the texts read.

To expand the data presented in this article, a future study can contrast the data highlighted and analyzed here with that of library loans and the online book lending service of public libraries (eBiblio, Biblio Digital and eLiburutegia) to contrast the differences and similarities. Likewise, the analysis of the reading clubs could be completed with the evaluation data that the participants make of the books read.

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