

Timeless Quandaries in Librarianship

By Jill Owens

One of librarians' least favorite duties is the weeding of old materials -- also sometimes referred to as culling or deselection. I was a skeptic in library school when a professor said that this would be one of the most controversial and emotional things that happens in a library; however, experience has shown he was right.

Controversies on what should be in a collection go back as far as the reading rooms in the 1800s...the balance of being a place of popular reading resources vs. a scholarly repository has been argued long and hard, and never answered to everyone's satisfaction (Taste-Elevation Theory, anyone?).

Much less so than, say, an academic or other special library, a public library has a broader mission and target audience (everyone!) so these tensions are bound to come up. Most people have their favorites and their idea of standards or core collections, and this is one place the angst comes from. Often, yesterday's sacred cow becomes today's passé. Patrons do not wish their favorites ever to be thinned to make room for the new.

Two of the most well-known guidelines for weeding are identified by the acronyms CREW (Continuous Review Evaluation Weeding) and MUSTIE (Misleading, Ugly, Superseded, Trivial, Irrelevant, Elsewhere).

Staff has many criteria under each of these main points and a starting point is usage. In addition to checkout statistics we also track in-house use. Some items are just used for reference or other types of use not involving checkout, and so we added a scan a few years ago so those materials 'get credit' for when they are used even if they have low checkout numbers.

To make things more difficult, publishers will use marketing tricks to sell more books. Just to name one, they create so-called series of stand-alone topics as a marketing tool, and make them visually similar so that staff and patrons think of them as a set and feel they must be dealt with as a group even if they are shelved (via Dewey) in different sections. So there are sets and then there are sets. Don't even get me started on series.

Another worry that is sometimes brought up is money. Many of us are savers, and want to squeeze the last possible use out of an item and the library staff is no exception (as you can probably tell by looking at our furnishings). However, the collections are such a core of library service it is important to keep them updated even if the curtains predate the nifty-fifties.

Things one would think of as forever current, such as history books or literature criticisms do need to be refreshed. Just a few years ago, I could still find history books circulating that referred to "Japs" and "Nips". I also found a review of "Othello" claiming this character behaved the way he did because of his "hot African blood." And like the outdated terminology and slurs, current thought on old history does evolve.

Unlike library staff of a decade or two ago, today we have to create room for many formats. We need to have books on disc, DVDs, large print books, materials in Spanish, computer labs, and the list is ever-expanding. Further, publishing has exploded in all forms, and there are so many more possibilities of titles than in past years. Things just have to go so that other things can come in.

I wish there were space to go into every aspect of the deselection process, but even if you don't agree with the decisions made, please be assured there is a method to our madness and we aren't just arbitrarily putting your favorites on the next book sale.

Recent memorials to the Library Foundation: Carol Keller donated in memory of Lucille Ellison; Kay Berg gave in memory of Judy Menke; and Phyllis Wragge memorialized Bruno Becher.