The weeding war

Commentary

"If you [must] weed, do it Sunday, after midnight"

"We have to weed the collection!" Every librarian will tell you that, but a great many library users, including many of those unpredictable "Friends of the Library," along with a lot of other citizens, simply don't understand why it is necessary to throw away "good books." As a result, careless weeding of library collections has been the source of tremendous misunderstanding, disruption, bad publicity, and, all-too-frequently, the departure of library directors.

Who can forget Nicholson Baker's "The Author vs. the Library" in the October 1998 issue of The New Yorker, which combined a plea to save library card catalogs and to stop replacing books with microform copies with an attack on the practice of weeding. These themes were carried over to his 2001 book Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper (Random).

Each time a weeding controversy hits another library, I think of my author friend who was outraged when he was told by a librarian that one or more of his books had been "weeded" from the collection. "They weren't weeds when you planted them!" he would shout as he stormed out of the building.

There is little doubt that weeding is controversial, and that is why it must be done with great care, very quietly.

It would be a great step forward if we could find a better name for the practice, one that didn't have the negative implications about what was being removed from the library. I have thought about that for decades, because a weeding fracas at the academic library where I worked nearly got me fired from my third library job. I still haven't come up with a kinder term, a euphemism to describe the process that doesn't call the discarded books "weeds." But I'm sure we could find some label that describes the process as "cleaning the collection" or "dispensing with worn-out books."

The root problem is that the majority of people see most books as permanently valuable, and for many that is true. Our personal books don't circulate, so they don't wear out, and even when they do, we hang on to them. Consider how many of us still find shelf space at home for all of our beat-up and tattered college textbooks that we rarely, if ever, consult in later life. In the eyes of much of the population, every book must be maintained, no matter its condition or content.

Another concern arises when we make weeding a special project, done with lots of fanfare, employing a large number of library staff. It results in dumpsters and trash receptacles full of what look like good books. Some libraries have been attacked because users found books with library ownership marks in the local landfill.

Frequently, the weeding process is performed with less attention than it deserves. We employ questionable measures to determine if a book should be jettisoned. Low circulation or infrequent use numbers are not enough evidence to scrap a book. Publication or acquisition dates prove nothing about a book's value. Citizens don't even understand when a library tosses "extra" copies of a title that occupy shelf space because the work's popularity is past.

In truth, there is no way to convince our communities that a library needs to throw away books from its collection. That is what they learned in San Francisco when Baker went ballistic. That is what they are currently learning at the Fairfax County Public Library in Virginia, where angry Friends have protested a massive "weeding" project.

I wish I had a solution to bring peace to the long-standing weeding war, but it has been waged for more than a century. I guess the best advice I could devise for those who want or need to remove library books is what one experienced library director told me years ago: "If you are sure you have to weed, do it after midnight on a Sunday, and bury the discarded books at the bottom of the barrel, under the rest of the trash."

By John N. Berry III, jberry@mediasourceinc.com