

The

WEEDING

H A N D B O O K

For Review Only

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A Shelf-by-Shelf Guide

Second Edition

REBECCA VNUK

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INTRODUCTION

Weeding Skit

Written and performed by Ricki Nordmeyer, Jon Kadus, and Rebecca Vnuk at the 2000 ALA Annual Conference workshop presented by Merle Jacob, “Weeding the Fiction Collection: Or, Should I Dump *Peyton Place*?”

The three “Weeders” enter the stage with various expressions of agony on their faces and approach a table with several books on it. They have dust masks, latex gloves, a feather duster, and printouts with them.

RICKI. Come on, come on, the sooner we do this the sooner it’ll be over!

JON, *looking at his watch*. What time is it?

REBECCA. What else do you have to do?

JON. I select these materials. I’m behind on my journals.

RICKI. We have NO ROOM! You can’t purchase more books if there is no space for them.

JON. There’s an idea. Why don’t they just read the old ones?

REBECCA. Ooh. Look at them. These books are so dirty!

JON. Where? Which one? I must have missed that!

REBECCA. Not that kind of “dirty.”

RICKI. That’s why I brought these things. (*Distributes masks and gloves; waves around her feather duster.*) We’ll clean as we go.

JON. Are these latex? I won’t go into prophylactic shock, will I?

REBECCA. That’s anaphylactic shock. Little chance of either!

RICKI. Okay, okay. Let's get started. What's first?

REBECCA. *Take Leave and Go* by Karel Schoeman. This is like new.

RICKI. It's not in *Fiction Catalog*. When did it last go out?

REBECCA, *checking her printout*. Uh, it's never gone out.

JON. I know I wouldn't have bought it without a great review.

RICKI. It's never gone out!

REBECCA. What if they make it into a movie? I've heard rumors that Spielberg and Gibson want to do this.

RICKI. Okay, okay, we'll keep it.

JON. What about this one? *Two Little Misogynists* by Carl Spitteler. It's not in very good shape.

REBECCA. It hasn't gone out since 1987.

RICKI. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1919. We can't discard that, it's an award winner! I know, maybe we'll put it on a display.

JON, *under his breath*. Of oldy-moldy translations?

REBECCA. Okay, we have three copies of Jean Paul Sartre's *The Age of Reason*. Can we withdraw this copy?

RICKI. He's definitely in *Fiction Catalog*.

JON. You can never have enough of Sartre!

RICKI. What are the chances of three people in this town wanting this at the same time?

JON. You can never have enough of Sartre!

RICKI. Okay, okay . . . What about *The Age of Murderous Snailblasters* by George Salter? It's not in *Fiction Catalog* and I've never heard of the author.

REBECCA. It's never gone out.

JON. Wait a minute! Look at this bookplate.

RICKI. Donated by Hester Stoopover. AGGH!!! The mayor's wife!

JON. You know, I think I pulled this and declared it missing a while back.

REBECCA. She has a stack of them. She just re-donated it.

REBECCA, RICKI and JON, *in unison*. KEEP.

RICKI. *Mayday* by Thomas Block. This was published in 1979.

REBECCA. I was in kindergarten then.

(*Ricki and Jon roll eyes.*)

JON. What time is it? Are we almost done?

REBECCA. What is it? You got a date or something?

JON. As a matter of fact I do.

REBECCA. That must be the first time SINCE I was in kindergarten.

RICKI. All right, all right, back to business here. We have not made any headway, and I'm getting a lot of pressure to do something about these cramped shelves. I think we can pull *Mayday*. Has it ever gone out?

REBECCA. Eighty-two times. It was just returned last week.

JON. Well, that settles that one.

RICKI. Well, I know we'll get rid of this one with the puke-brown library binding . . . *The Women at the Pump* by Knut Hamsun. It's wretched!

JON, *sputtering*. (*Makes up a Norwegian title.*) \$#@#%\$ by Hamsun?? Why, my mother read that to me while I sat on her knee. She would roll over in her grave if she knew I had a part in throwing \$#@#%\$ away. Look! It says it's one of the Foreign Classical Romances right here on the cover.

RICKI. But it's only volume 1 . . .

JON. Then they could get started!!! You just can't throw this away. Why . . .

RICKI and REBECCA, *in unison*. KEEP.

REBECCA. We have twenty-three books by James Fenimore Cooper, but it looks like the only three that have ever circulated are *The Deerslayer*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Pathfinder*.

RICKI and JON. But it's Cooper, one of the greatest American authors.

REBECCA. But no one is reading them or cares!

RICKI and JON, *in unison*. JAMES. FENIMORE. COOPER.

(*The two point to the table as Rebecca sadly returns the book to the pile.*)

RICKI. Now for a change of pace: We seem to have 1,045 copies of Danielle Steel's books. She is coming out with them monthly now.

JON. YUCK! Get rid of them.

RICKI. You know if we just leave two copies of each that would look like we've weeded an entire range of books.

REBECCA. But it's all in the S's.

JON. Eh, let Circ shift the steel shelves.

REBECCA. Yeah, soon it will all be e-books so we won't need to weed.

ALL. We're out of here!!!

Weeding

The very word *weeding* often strikes terror in a librarian's heart. And it's not a new concept: it seems that weeding has been a controversial topic in the field of librarianship for a long time. As Lorie Roy, past president of the American Library Association (ALA), and professor, School of Information, University of Texas at Austin, noted in her entry on weeding in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, there were programs on weeding as far back as the 1893 ALA Annual Conference. William Poole, a founding member of ALA, was very concerned that weeding meant a local library would have "no books which will interest persons with an intellectual range above that of clod-hoppers and market gardeners." As Melvil Dewey bemoaned, "It is bad enough to stand the critics who complain that a book they wish has not been bought. You can always fall back on lack of funds. But it is a rash librarian who would like to tell one of these gentry that he had recently thrown that very book away."¹

It's a shame that not much has changed in over a hundred years. At just about any library conference, you'll still be able to find a program on weeding. Many librarians have never had formal instruction in

weeding—if they were lucky, maybe it was covered in a collection development class (if they took one).

I find no one is ambivalent about weeding—people either love it or loathe it. I fall into the love-it camp. In fact, I once imagined my perfect career would be traveling from library to library across the nation, weeding collections. However, most librarians dread the task. And I'm not heartless; I can see the reasons why. It can be hard to part with books that were carefully selected and paid for with tax dollars. Some librarians feel that it is impossible to imagine that a particular book no longer has any worth. Others have a hard time reconciling their calling as a keeper of information with the need to sometimes discard that information.

All of these worries and doubts are valid, but the bottom line is that libraries (particularly public libraries) are not—and never have been—archives. There simply is not enough space to hang on to every book and every item. And there is no need. A library is an ever-changing organism. Weeding helps a library thrive.

So, what makes me qualified to talk about weeding? In my library career, I've held numerous positions in public libraries, from librarian to collection development specialist to department manager, and in every job I've been in, there was a weeding project. I fell into weeding as a specialty by chance, but I do think that I have the temperament of a weeder. What do I mean by that? I mean that as much as I love reading and am passionate about books, I don't see them as some precious physical items. I don't have an emotional connection to the physical items themselves (even though I have an emotional and intellectual connection to the contents and the authors!).

Like many of my MLIS contemporaries, I didn't have formal weeding instruction in library school. I'm sure it may have been mentioned at some point in my public library administration course, but there was not a lot of time spent on weeding in any of my coursework. A class on collection development wasn't even offered at the time I was on campus. My first encounter with a collection that needed weeding was during an internship at an academic library, where I went to check out a copy of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. The library had a tattered mass-market

paperback copy that looked like it was ready for the shredder. The head librarian was, to her credit, quite embarrassed at the condition of the book, especially when I asked her why we couldn't spend the five or so dollars it would cost to buy a replacement.

In my first full-time job out of library school, I worked at a medium-sized suburban library that was tight on space—so tight that at that time, collection development was on a one-bought/one-weeded basis. I was given my first weeding project, which was culling the mystery section. It was an easy task because we had circulation reports showing what hadn't circulated in the last three years, and I simply used them (and visible condition) as my guideline. Because we spread out the project over several months, and it was obvious to all that we needed space, the project went very smoothly.

My next weeding project was not quite as smooth. In fact, it was a total nightmare. In 2001, the commissioner of Chicago Public Library (where I worked as a collection development specialist) deployed a team of librarians to one of the regional branches for a full-scale weeding project. I wasn't involved in the internal politics so I won't get into them here, but suffice it to say that, for whatever reason, the collection was badly in need of weeding. Tensions ran high on the project—branch librarians were unhappy that they were not consulted, the branch director was in personal conflict with the commissioner, and the public was not informed that any such project was going to take place. Because the collection was large, and overdue for weeding, there was a vast number of items removed from the shelves in a short period of time. To cut a long story short, a local alderman was alerted that the library was being “decimated” and decided to head over and see for himself, with a reporter from the neighborhood newspaper in tow. The alderman frightened many of my coworkers by storming into an employees-only workspace, while yelling that our jobs were on the line if we didn't have suitable answers to his questions. Because I was the most senior person in the room, I had the pleasure of dealing with the very irate (and misinformed) gentleman. The incident eventually made it to the *Chicago Tribune*, where I was an “unidentified library official” who ordered the alderman off the premises.²

I learned many important lessons from that project. Always—*always*—have staff on board. There is no reason to keep experienced members of your staff from participating in a weeding project. It's also of the utmost importance to keep your community involved in what's going on at the library. (I'll talk more about these two topics in chapter 1, and more about avoiding a weeding disaster in chapter 11.) Looking back, I can certainly see why patrons would be fearful of what was going on. There were recycling bags and dumpsters filled with what to them appeared to be perfectly useful books. If the public had been better informed about what the project entailed, I have a feeling the entire alderman/reporter incident never would have occurred.

My next position entailed working at a large suburban library that was preparing to move into a new building. The fiction collection, which I was in charge of, needed to be cut by about 10 percent to prepare for the move. In a three-month period, I single-handedly weeded over 9,000 books. This was *tiring*, let me tell you. I would go home, hands aching, and dream at night about books, books, and more books. But it was very rewarding work—the fiction section in the new library building looked fresh and wonderful, and was filled with items that people actually wanted to use. The project went quite smoothly because we kept our patrons informed of the process and explained to them that the bulk of the items being removed were either multiple copies or items that had not circulated in more than seven years. I don't recall a single patron complaint.

The next major weeding project I was in charge of took place when I worked for a very small suburban public library. The collection was in dire need of a complete overhaul, so we weeded over 45 percent of the entire adult collection. In this instance, I was very lucky that the library's board also doubled my book budget for a year so that I could replace all of those items! Again, public perception was key—we kept the public informed about why we were getting rid of so much of the collection and also made them aware of what we were doing to beef it back up. In fact, we kept a "Cart of Shame" during this project, which was instrumental in getting the board to give us more money for replacements. Nothing beats hard evidence when it comes to illustrating why a weeding project

is necessary. No one could argue that it was acceptable to have books on yoga (a trendy topic at the time) that had no photographs but instead had line drawings of poses, or that we needed that softcover book on disco dancing (complete with a pull-out 45 RPM record!). My absolute favorite Cart of Shame item was the particularly nasty Jane Austen omnibus edition. There was something gross and possibly growing on the cover, it smelled like cigarettes, and it had the classic wavy pages of something that had been read in the bathtub . . . but we still had it on the fiction shelves. Because, you know, it's really hard to get replacement copies of any Jane Austen titles.

When I took the editing position at *Booklist*, I was put in charge of the e-newsletter *Corner Shelf*, which is devoted to collection development and readers' advisory topics. (You can view issues and subscribe to the current newsletter for free at www.booklistonline.com/newsletters.) I knew right away that I wanted a recurring feature on weeding. That turned into the popular "Weeding Tips" column, which is the basis for the shelf-specific chapters of this book.

The general weeding guidelines found in the "Weeding Tips" series mainly cover what to get rid of (with a few notes here and there on what can or should remain) from any given library's shelves. And there's good reason for that. I can't tell you exactly what you should keep. In fact, no one can tell you what to keep on your shelves, unless they work with your patrons and your collection. Weeding advice abounds, and much of it relates to a wide range of collections. Reports can guide you in the right direction, but you will still have to come up with the magic number that works for your library to apply to that data. Although it's easy enough to judge most of the nonfiction collection (tell me you don't have outdated medical books on your shelves, please), what's a good length of time to keep a fiction book? Three years with no circulation? Five years? More? It depends on a variety of issues. How much space do you have? What is your end goal for the weeding project? What condition is the book in? And speaking of condition, who gets to judge? One person's tattered is another's "well-loved" (although I always err on the side of making the grossness factor a big consideration).

This uncertainty is likely the main reason why some people are so uncomfortable with weeding. We all want reassurance that what we're pulling isn't something that will be needed later. We want to know we've made the right decisions. What helps with those decisions is a solid collection development plan—which is covered in chapter 13. Having a plan in place puts everyone on the same page and can save a lot of time and frustration at all stages of the weeding project. Although it can't tell you what to keep, it can give you firm guidelines of what should—and shouldn't—remain on your shelves.

All of that said, I still fret over the thought of leaving people in the lurch about what to keep and what to weed. Feel free to contact me if you're currently wrestling with something you are unsure about. Although I can't claim to give you the definitive, end-all-be-all answer, I may be able to offer some help or just reassurance that you're on the right track.

Why Update?

In 2017, a colleague posted a photo of the first edition of this book on Facebook. Someone commented, "The first thing to weed is a book about weeding," which made me laugh but horrified my friend, who replied that perhaps the author of such a book might feel differently. I started to think about it. When would such advice become dated? What new topics have come up in the past five years? The good news is that much of the advice is still the same. Based on user feedback and reviews, I have thoroughly examined the shelf-by-shelf advice and made adjustments where readers felt things could be made more general (mostly material age considerations) and added tips throughout reflecting diversity and inclusion and budgetary issues. This edition includes an important new chapter on diversity and inclusion, additional updated collection development plan samples, and a series of interviews offering sage advice from currently practicing library staff.

Rereading the Weeding Skit, I'm still highly amused that even twenty years later, e-books have not meant the end of print books. The chapter on weeding digital collections has been updated, but it is interesting to note

that even after many temporary public library shutdowns in 2020 thanks to COVID-19, an uptick in digital collection use has still not meant a permanent downturn in print collections. Although many libraries realized the need to shift their collection development practices and policies in both the short-term and long-term, change still comes slowly, and most North American publishers reported healthy print book sales in 2020.

Speaking of 2020 . . . there is probably not a library in existence where circulation did not fall during the pandemic. Many locations closed, some for long periods of time; and even at those that remained open or did work-arounds like curbside pickup or self-service holds, many patrons stayed away. My best practical advice for this situation is to take your 2020 circulation stats with a grain of salt. (That goes for any time you have a major disruption to your usual routine. Closed for renovations? Emergency closure? Remove those time periods from your reports.) Hopefully, your prior year and post-disruption year stats will reflect a more accurate record of circulation and will still be useful. You just may need to spend extra effort on determining new statistics to use.

How to Use This Book

The goal of this book is to give the reader a good grounding in how and why to weed library collections. I've consciously stayed away from offering numerical formulas, as there are several resources that go in-depth with formulas and statistics. Stanley J. Slote's *Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods* offers the idea of a variable called "shelf-time period," defined as the "time a book remains on the shelf between successive uses." Slote's manual espouses that this formula is the best way to create "a smaller core collection that would satisfy a given level of predicted future use."³ The *CREW Manual*, which I'll talk about further in chapter 1, offers a numerical formula based on the copyright date, the date of last checkout, and conditional factors.⁴

If you are looking for a formula, then either the Slote method or CREW will give you what you are looking for. (Some weeders may wish to consult Tony Greiner and Bob Cooper's *Analyzing Library Collection Use with Excel*®.)⁵ My aim is to inspire you to weed, and because these publications

already offer fantastic suggestions for using numbers and statistics, I'm not going to reinvent the wheel. I encourage readers to peruse the various statistical methodologies available and determine if one would work for their particular collections. My approach is intended to give library staff the knowledge and confidence needed to effectively weed any collection, of any size.

Because this book is intended for public and school libraries, the "shelf-by-shelf" advice is written by Dewey area, not Library of Congress Classification. I have made some callouts in each area for the different considerations of large collections and smaller collections.

A Note on Academic Libraries

Weeding in the academic library could be a separate book altogether, but I didn't want to leave it out of the discussion. Although public libraries tend to provide general materials suitable for a variety of users, academic libraries differ in that they need to support the curriculum of the institution. And within the world of academic libraries, a university that supports doctoral candidates requires different materials than a liberal arts college or a community college. More and more often, academic libraries are shifting their budget dollars away from print to electronic resources. So you can see how it would be difficult to talk about academic weeding in general terms.

Many academic libraries seek feedback about the library collection from faculty members, both in terms of what to purchase and what to weed. This gets tricky because faculty frequently want to keep everything. Or perhaps they were involved in the purchase in the first place, which can make it even more difficult to let go of an item. When possible, it is a good idea to give faculty the chance to review items before they are withdrawn, not only as a goodwill gesture, but also because faculty may truly be the experts in the subject.

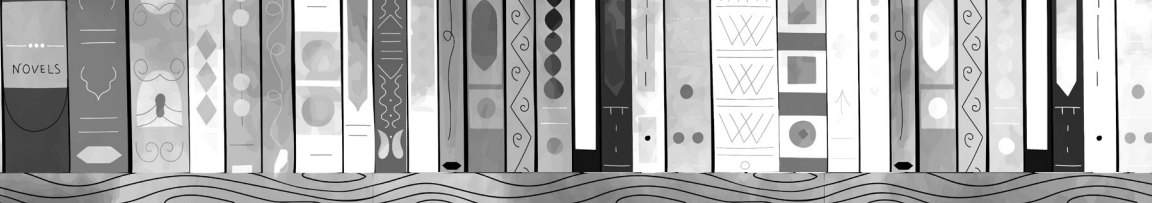
Academic library weeding can also be difficult because many items in an academic library may not circulate. As noted in chapter 1, there are methods that can be used to track non-circulating material, such as asking patrons to tick a piece of paper attached to the front of the book or

asking them not to reshelve reference items so that at the end of the day, a shelver can make note of items that have been used and left out.

In many academic libraries (and some larger public libraries), an effort may be made to keep superseded editions or materials that are acknowledged as outdated in order to provide a historical perspective for that discipline. This may not be an issue with the arts and humanities, but it is a terrible practice in most other subject fields. Outdated information on medicine, law, and the hard sciences can mislead patrons. An effort should be made to keep such items separate from current materials on a subject, or marked as such.

NOTES

1. Lorie Roy, "Weeding," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, ed. Allen Kent, Harold Lancour, William Z. Nasri, and Jay Elwood Daily, vol. 54, supplement 17 (New York: Dekker, 1968-), 352-98.
2. Gary Washburn and Rudolph Bush, "City Library Hopes Dispute Is Shelved," *Chicago Tribune*, August 24, 2001, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-08-24/news/0108240230_1_library-issues-library-system-books.
3. Stanley J. Slote, *Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods*, 4th ed. (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1997).
4. Jeannette Larson, *CREW: A Weeding Manual for Modern Libraries*, rev. ed. (Austin, TX: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 2012).
5. Tony Greiner and Bob Cooper, *Analyzing Library Collection Use with Excel®* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007).



CHAPTER 1

The Basics

LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING: Why is it important that libraries weed?

- **To free up shelf space**

In most libraries, the shelves should ideally be 75 to 85 percent full. This makes the items much easier to browse and to shelve, and, in general, makes the collection look better. But it's not only looks that matter—it also saves the patron time and frustration. When outdated materials are removed, then newer, more frequently used materials become clearly visible on the shelves. Who wants to search through a dozen outdated or ragged books to find the one they are really looking for?

- **To implement collection development best practices**

How better to get a good handle on what you already own and what areas you need to beef up than to weed on a regular basis? It can be invaluable to look at and touch every book in your collection. Weeding increases knowledge of the collection as a whole. The selector can see firsthand what materials are damaged and should be replaced and which need updating, and can also get a sense of what is used (and more importantly when it comes to weeding, what *isn't* used) by the patrons.

- **To purge outdated materials**

There is a real need to have timely information on your shelves, particularly in nonfiction and in reference. Remember that your library is not a museum—there is simply not enough space (nor is it a library’s mission) to be a warehouse of unused books. It’s also very important to remember that reference material has an expiration date! It is also imperative to view materials through the lens of diversity and inclusion. Outdated or misrepresentational material needs to be removed on a regular basis. The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction has a very thorough tool for screening for biased content available online (www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/equity/pubdocs/WA-ScreeningForBiasedContent-Form.pdf), *Washington Model Resource: Screening for Biased Content in Instructional Materials*.

Crowded shelves and worn-out books are distasteful, especially to busy patrons. Just as a bookstore maximizes its profits by clearing out poorly selling titles to make room for the new books that constantly arrive, a library must consider if removing titles that do not circulate might maintain or even increase its budget allocation. How does that work? The budget is often set in relation to the value and esteem in which the community holds the library, which in turn depends to a large degree on circulation figures.

The idea that we are the chosen keepers of the sacred books is at odds with the fact that weeding goes to the very core of the librarian’s professional responsibility to offer patrons the very best information possible. To those librarians who feel that weeding goes against our duty to protect books and information, I would remind them of the last two of S. R. Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science: *save the time of the reader* and *the library is a growing organism*.

Ideally, weeding is an ongoing process. Many libraries try to follow a weeding schedule that allows for an easy, continual flow to the weeding process. Weeding throughout the year reduces the number of materials withdrawn at one time and keeps your community happy—the shelves

look fresh, and patrons will not see a large number of books leaving the building at one given time. If you haven't made an effort to weed continually—or even if you have—a weeding project may be needed. Specifically, you know you need a “deep weed” when shelf space becomes impossible to navigate or patrons complain about the condition of materials or a lack of current information.

Weeding Responsibility

Because many libraries, especially smaller ones, do not have dedicated collection development librarians, collection development plans should designate the personnel in each department who are responsible for weeding. The best way to handle this is to let those who select materials be responsible for deselecting them. These staff members should have the expertise and experience with their collection areas needed to make good decisions. Because personal and detailed knowledge of the collection can be indispensable when weeding, firsthand knowledge about the community and the tastes of local users comes in handy. If a single person handles all of the materials buying (as is common in smaller libraries), then a committee or group should be formed to cover weeding. Team weeding lessens the burden and provides for a balanced view of the collection. The collection development plan should clearly state that final decisions should rest with department managers (or the library director if appropriate).

Where to Begin?

You need to have a solid collection development plan in place. (You'll see this again in chapter 13.) This not only gives you backup by highlighting your reasons for weeding and your timeline, but it also guides your staff. At the end of this chapter, you'll find a basic, easily adaptable sample to kickstart the weeding and retention section of a collection development plan.

There are a number of ways to handle the question of *when* to weed. Many libraries rely on automated computer reports to identify low circulating items. It's easy enough to have those items pulled and reviewed. Some libraries specify (by policy or when space necessitates) that a certain percentage of the collection must be evaluated on an annual basis. There are also less formal ways of accomplishing weeding tasks, such as having librarian selectors periodically check their areas or have shelve alert them to overcrowded areas that need weeding. I feel very strongly that all libraries can benefit from having a published schedule for weeding.

A wonderful example of a weeding schedule comes from the King County Library System (KCLS) in Washington. KCLS uses the following schedule as a guideline for weeding collections, aimed at a review of the entire collection each year (reprinted with permission).

January	000-099
January	Fiction A-B
January	Youth Graphic Novels
February	100-199
February	Fiction C-D-E
February	J Series
March	200-299
March	Fiction F-G
March	World Language
April	300-399
April	Fiction H-I-J
April	E/J Folk and Fairy Tales
May	400-499
May	Fiction K-L
May	DVDs
June	Fiction M
June	Large Print
June	CD Music

July	500-599
July	Fiction N-O-P
July	ABE/ESL
August	600-699
August	Fiction Q-R
August	Reference
September	700-799
September	Fiction S
September	Audiobooks (including read-alongs)
October	800-899
October	Fiction T-U-V
October	E Readers
November	900-999
November	Fiction W
November	Teen Classics
December	Fiction X-Y-Z
December	Biographies
December	E Board Books

All major integrated library system (ILS) software has the ability to generate circulation reports. You may be able to run them yourself, or you may have to request them from your vendor, but the records exist—use them! Reports from your cataloging system are invaluable for weeding. You can sort them by all kinds of criteria, including last checkout date, age of item, and number of checkouts. The numbers will, of course, vary depending on the size and type of library and the purpose of your collection, but chapters 2 through 9 offer some general advice. Reports can give you a great overall picture of your collection, even outside of the numbers specific to each item. For example, a report can show you the average circulation rate of items at a particular call number. This will let you know whether you need to take a closer look at the section or if you should purchase more in that area.

Pre-Weeding Steps

Identify Stakeholders: Library administrators need to support and endorse the weeding process. Librarians should be prepared to weed. Support staff, such as shelvers or IT personnel, may be called upon to create lists and check for circulation of weeded materials not on any lists. Catalogers and other technical services staff will need to assist with updating holdings and the discard process.

Shelf Read: This will ensure that the area to be worked on is complete and is an opportunity to check what may be missing or lost from the collection.

Pull Visibly Damaged Items: A page or shelver can perform a quick run-through of shelves due for weeding and pull items that need a closer look based on condition.

Build Weeding into the Schedule: When staff have a clear understanding of a project, they are more likely to get it done in a reasonable amount of time. Schedule time for weeding the same way you would schedule on-desk hours.

Determine Your Steps: There are important questions to consider. Will you work a literal shelf at a time? Will you work in the stacks

or move a truck to the workroom? What will you do with items that need replacing or mending? Where will discards go?

Things to Look For

- outdated information (particularly in the 300s and 600s)
- outdated Popular Interest
- repetition or multiple copies
- superseded editions
- items reflecting stereotypes or outdated thinking
- items that do not reflect diversity or inclusion
- items that promote cultural misrepresentation
- tattered or dirty items
- poorly bound items
- dated dust jackets (especially in youth collections)
- little use or lack of patron demand
- no long-term or historical significance
- space limitations/oversaturation in certain areas

The CREW method (which stands for **C**ontinuous **R**eword, **E**valuation, and **W**eeding), created by Belinda Boon and Joseph P. Segal, offers six general guidelines for judging library material under the acronym MUSTIE:

M = *Misleading*: factually inaccurate

U = *Ugly*: beyond mending or rebinding

S = *Superseded* by a new edition or by a much better book on the subject

T = *Trivial*: of no discernible literary or scientific merit

I = *Irrelevant* to the needs and interests of the library's community

E = *Elsewhere*: the material is easily obtainable from another library

For more information, see www.tsl.state.tx.us/ld/pubs/crew. Other common acronyms include WIDUS: (**W**eed **U**s!) **W**orn out, **I**nappropriate, **D**uplicated, **U**ncirculated, **S**uperseded and WORST: **W**orn out, **O**ut of date, **R**arely used, **S**upplied elsewhere, **T**rivial or faddish.

It may sound trite, but don't be afraid to weed on looks alone. I've been in too many libraries where a good one-third of the collection could be replaced based on rips, smells, and stains alone. Who wants to check out a nasty book? This can be an easy way to weed on an ongoing basis. Ask the circulation staff to hold questionable books that are returned to the library. Coach your shelvers on how to preselect tattered materials for a librarian to check.

Wesleyan University completed a massive weeding project from 2011 through 2014, culling some 60,000 volumes from the collection. Its criteria for setting up initial lists of books to withdraw is useful framework for both academic and public libraries (reprinted with permission).

Criteria Used in the Creation of the Potential Withdrawal Lists

1. **Books published before 1990:** Many—not all—scholarly books are most useful, and most used, in the several years just after they are published. Books that are over twenty years old are less likely to be used and are therefore good candidates for weeding.
2. **Books added to the library's collection before 2003:** Books added to the library's collections recently may prove useful but have not been in the collection long enough to be proved useful or otherwise. We are retaining books added since 2003 so that they have more time to be discovered and used. Why 2003? In 2003 the library migrated to our current online library system, and we know what books we ordered before and after 2003. So 2003 is a convenient breakpoint for this criterion.
3. **Books that have not checked out since 2003 and have checked out once or not at all since 1996:** Books with one or fewer checkouts since 1996, and none since 2003, may be of less use to students and faculty than books that have checked out more frequently during the same time period. Why 2003 and 1996? As noted above, 2003 is when we migrated to our current online system, and we have detailed circulation statistics for each book since then. We have summary circulation statistics for each book from 1996 to 2002, when we were using a different online system. Before then we do not have online circulation statistics.

(continued)

4. Books held by more than thirty other libraries in the United States:

If a withdrawn book is later needed by a Wesleyan student or faculty member, we will order it through interlibrary loan (ILL). Books held by more than thirty other libraries in the United States will be easy to find and order via ILL.

5. Books held by two or more partner libraries:

Wesleyan University Library is part of the CTW Consortium, with Trinity College and Connecticut College. The CTW Consortium, with the library at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, share collections through a delivery service. We can be confident that books held by two or more of our partners in this service will be quickly available if needed by a Wesleyan student or faculty member.

How We Combined These Criteria (for Fans of Boolean Logic)

The books on the list of potential withdrawals meet all of these criteria. So, they are published before 1990 AND added to the collections before 2003 AND have not checked out since 2003 AND have checked out once or not at all since 1996 AND are held by more than thirty libraries in the United States AND are held by two or more of our partner libraries.

If a book does not meet all these criteria, it is not on the list.

What if you just aren't sure about a particular title? Ask yourself the following questions:

- Would I be embarrassed if the library didn't own it?
- Does the book fit the needs of my community or is it of local interest?
- Is the author still living and writing?
- If I put this on display, would it go out?

There's an excuse for everything. Here are some rebuttals to the things that may be keeping you from weeding:

- *That's taxpayer money!* It's more of a waste of taxpayer dollars to keep outdated or nasty books on the shelf. Time is money, too—your patrons shouldn't have to waste their time searching through your outdated collections.

- *But I bought that book myself—I have a personal connection to it!* Think of your personal responsibility to the collection as a whole.
- *Books are valuable!* There is no value in dangerously outdated material or soiled items.
- *I'm afraid it will look bad to have empty shelves.* Keep your community informed about what's happening when you weed, and remember that replacement is a key component of weeding as well.
- *This is someone's favorite book!* And we'd be happy to ILL it for him.

Getting Staff on Board

All staff members, whether they are directly involved in the weeding process or not, should be made aware of the task at hand. It's important to keep all library staff informed so they can alleviate any patron anxiety. Front-line staff are the ones who work with the collection on a daily basis, and they are the ones who discuss what's going on with concerned patrons. Staff who are directly involved need to be part of the process and should have input. There needs to be an understanding, if not an agreement, on exactly what is going to happen to the collection: why the weeding project needs to take place and how it's going to work.

Staff members who are given responsibility for purchasing should also be responsible for weeding. It's simply part of the collection development cycle. Librarians who select in an area should have the professional judgment to know when to cull and to update.

It's important to remember that everyone in the library has a stake in weeding and will likely be called upon to assist. Therefore it is crucial that the entire staff understand what needs to happen and how it's going to happen. All library staff need to stay informed so they can alleviate any patron anxieties. Staff *must* be part of the process and should have input. If staff are not on board with weeding, your public will never be. Talking about weeding shouldn't be secretive or become a painful process. It should be an expectation of the job and presented in positive

terms. Identify why staff members might be having trouble with a weeding project. What are their fears?

Public Perception

As noted above, public communication about weeding should be open and clear. Trying to keep a weeding project secret almost guarantees trouble. Staff should use positives instead of negatives when talking about it and should never complain to patrons about the bad materials that were on the shelf previously. (The one exception to this is using the Cart of Shame to your advantage, as mentioned below.) Instead, they can explain that the library is making room for new materials, making the shelves easier to navigate, and replacing outdated information with current information. In fact, it's important for everyone to keep in mind that weeding isn't always about clearing the shelves—sometimes it's about getting fresh new copies of the exact same titles. More on the subject of public perception is discussed in chapter 11.

The Double-Edged Embarrassment Test

*Annabelle Mortensen, Access Services Manager
Skokie Public Library, Skokie, Illinois*

RV: Tell us a bit about your career and your current library.

AM: I've worked in public libraries for almost twenty years; collection development and weeding have been part of my work for much of that time. Name a collection, and I've worked on weeding it: adult, kids, fiction, nonfiction, audiovisual, reference, periodicals, e-books—I've laid waste to all of 'em!

At my current library, we weed year-round but have also done special projects as needed. We had a hugely overstuffed collection and haphazard weeding; in recent years we moved to more centralized selection and began being more consistent—and prescriptive—about weeding in anticipation of a multiyear building renovation. We teamed up for some of the larger collections because we were under a time crunch and also to bring a different perspective—our kids nonfiction selector weeded

some adult nonfiction, for example. Now with the renovation and “emergency weeding,” as we called it, behind us, we’re working on creating a more consistent year-round weeding schedule and also revising our collection plan/weeding manual to reflect that.

With regard to public perception, we try to make sure to have consistent messaging about weeding and talking points for staff, including emphasizing how interlibrary loan can supplement anything we don’t have and how we actually replace many weeded items with new or more current materials. There are some folks who were unhappy when we started moving toward being more of a popular materials collection. Decades ago we veered toward slightly scholarly, especially with adult nonfiction, but the pushback was honestly minimal—a few squeaky wheels.

With the renovation, the entire layout of the library changed, so most patrons don’t notice the change. However, we really had to take an axe to some areas, and fans of those spots that got the axe have noticed. In some cases, like audiobooks and CDs, we talk about how many users have moved to digital, and so we have a smaller collection but still are getting some new items for those that want them. In other cases, we throw numbers at them—usually when folks learn about how little certain areas circulated, they’re disappointed but at least they understand. We’re also lucky to have a basement with some shelves, so sometimes we’ll put things in storage for a while as a way station—if they’re requested or put on hold, we’ll add them back to the collection; if not, they are weeded after a certain period of time. I also—per your suggestion, I’m pretty sure—have a “horrible weeded books” shelf to show people whenever they complain about weeding.

RV: What is your weeding philosophy?

AM: “Weeding is a public service” or, more practically, “Books are just paper, ink, and glue.”

RV: How did you learn to weed?

AM: Yikes, that’s a good question. I suppose I learned the basics—CREW and all that—but in library school I feel like it really got refined by actually doing it and seeing how each collection and sub-collection is unique, as well as how collection curation is as much about what you take out as it is what you put in. I’ve also attended talks and webinars on weeding, read books—like the first edition of yours, my weeding bible!—and discuss it a lot in collection networking groups.

(continued)

RV: Is there anything unique or interesting about your library's collections and/or the way they are weeded?

AM: As more of a focus shifts to creating collection diversity, we've been more active in weeding books—especially kids' books—that feature harmful stereotypes. I think the focus in this area is too often about adding books, not weeding them, but active weeding makes your overall collection more diverse and anti-racist.

I don't think it's unique, but we also try to emphasize what is not weeded—we won't touch local history, no matter how crappy it looks. However, if it's truly decrepit, we'll put it in storage or move it to reference—which is a small collection where we have more tolerance for old-looking things. We put a stamp in books that are general but have a local history angle, so we don't weed those either. In both cases, though, it's history directly related to our village, not the general region. So grungy books about Chicago are weeded—it's up to Chicago Public Library to hold on to that history.

I also often ask staff to use the double-edged Embarrassment Test:
(a) Would you be embarrassed if we didn't have this item in the collection?
(b) Are you embarrassed that we *do* have this item in our collection?
Exhibit A—every book that calls Pluto a planet.

RV: What are the worst books you've weeded?

AM: I have two favorites. The first is weeding the baby name book that said "everyone assumes Candi is a stripper, so perhaps stick to Candace instead." I wish I remembered the name of the book, but it was horrifically offensive, something you could not have instantly known from the cover. And it circulated! Then, *How to Help Your Husband Get Ahead in His Social and Business Life* by Mrs. Dale Carnegie—that's how she was listed in the main entry; her actual name was Dorothy. I weeded this book in, ahem, 2019. I kept it for my "why we weed" shelf.

RV: What's one of your favorite weeding stories?

AM: During my first major weed as a newbie librarian, the inevitable happened—someone asked for something a week or two after I weeded it—it was a CD copy of *The Lover in Me* by Sheena Easton . . . this was a good decade and a half after the initial release. I was slightly mortified, but then a colleague said that librarians need to get over the compulsion of wanting to provide every item for every person instantaneously every time. It was a formative experience, and what she said is still true today.

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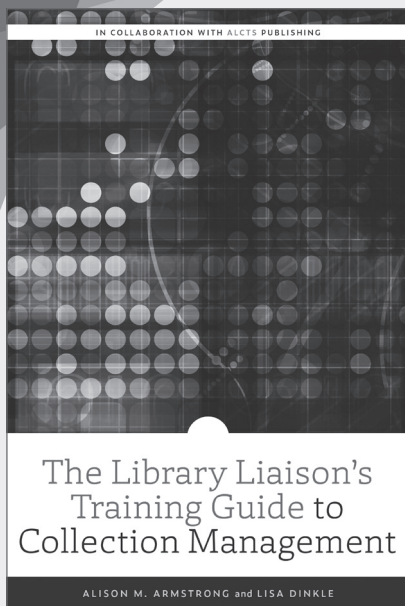
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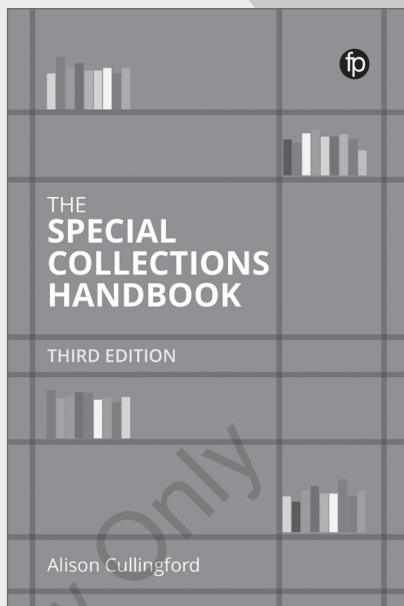
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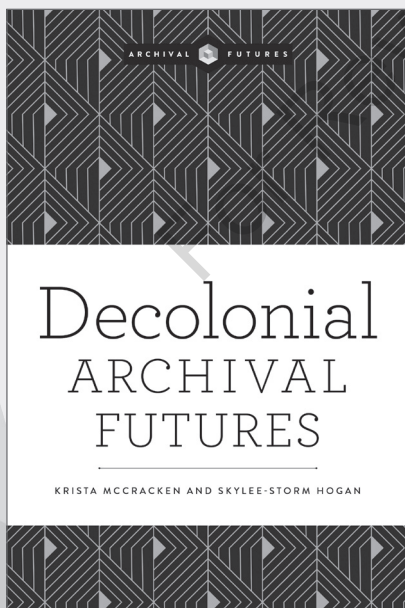
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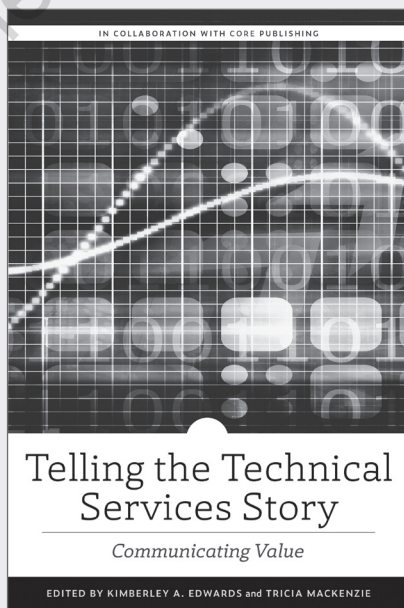
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