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Killing Sir Walter Scott: A Philosophical Exploration of Weeding

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Who would want to kill this dashing fellow, 19th century author of popular historical novels, plays, and poetry? Not I. But I did find myself weeding many of his works in my library—and feeling horrible about it. This article is the result of a more serious examination of those horrible feelings. Photo credit: "Statue of Sir Walter Scott, Princes Street, Edinburgh," by Calotype46 / CC-NC-SA

In Brief: Weeding a library collection, while an absolutely essential part of collection management, is a much more complex issue than library literature—and library practitioners—would like to admit. It is not just an intellectual and physical process but an *emotional* one, wedded to deep psychological, cultural, and even metaphysical issues. This article explores some of the reasons why weeding can be so heartbreaking, difficult, and miserable.

The Promises of Weeding

I'm not a huge fan of gardening, but there is one green-thumb task I hate more than all others: yanking up the weeds, those nasty little suckers that seem to pop up overnight in the spring and summer. Like washing dishes or making the bed or doing laundry, weeding is a task that is never finished, yet

1/10

important to do, unless you want to live with squalor and filth and lawsuits from neighbors who are concerned about the forest in your front yard.

You know where this is going, fellow librarians.

"Weeding" library collections, also known as deselection (in more formal circles) or "taking out the trash" (less so), is a task that is both dreaded and necessary. Some might argue with the thesis that regularly weeding the collection is good for libraries, much as there are those who might argue that there are no signs of climate change. (One need only look at the <u>recent outcry against weeding</u> in the Urbana Free Library system to see this idea in action.) Despite this, the professional library (as opposed to general public, as in Urbana) consensus and research and just plain common sense all agree that without weeding, our libraries would suffer.

Indeed, regular and judicious weeding all but guarantees shinier hair and higher GRE scores: it increases circulation, saves space, makes readers happier, and improves staff efficiency (Slote 1997). Typical statements about weeding in the library literature affirm that "weeding is a fundamental activity that must be encouraged and embraced" (Dilevko 2003, 93) and that "without an ongoing weeding program, a collection can quickly age and become difficult to use" (Evans 2005, 295).

Despite this overwhelming evidence, librarians—including me, I freely admit—nevertheless gnash our teeth and rend our garments, metaphorically, when it is determined that Weeding Time is nigh.

A Tale of Two Weedings

It's not my first time at the weeding rodeo. When I started my current position at a large urban library, in 2006, I faced a fiction collection of about 40,000 items that had not been weeded in more than a decade. The shelvers were crying in the workroom because they had carts upon carts of homeless books. It took me nearly nine months of daily work (which I mostly hated) to complete that weeding. Since then, I've been diligent about my annual collection evaluation and purging, and I am happy to report that shelvers rarely cry in the workroom, at least for fiction-related reasons.

But last spring I was asked to weed a fiction collection I'd been explicitly told I could not touch: storage. Unlike my usual yearly weeding, this prospect thrilled me. These were books that had not been evaluated for weeding, ever, or at least in the 25 years or so they'd been languishing in my library's basement, and it showed. Picture the most awful "awful library books" in the Awful Library Books blog: stained covers, crumbly pages, with actual mold on the inside and dusty covers on the outside. According to my 347-page monstrosity of a not-circulated-in-three-years list, most of the books in storage had not been checked out in the 14 years since we implemented our new circulation system.

Sure, there were still tough calls to be made, and I wanted to get it right. For example, should I weed the pristine yet award-winning international literary title not circulated in five years? What about a minor work by Balzac? Wait, was it really minor, or was my knowledge of 19th-century French novelists just miserably lacking? Was Frank Yerby, the mid-20th-century African-American author, considered important enough, either literarily or culturally, to merit this much storage space? And worst of all, did we *really* need all of Sir Walter Scott's approximately 50 million bazillion novels? His oeuvre took up nearly three feet of packed shelves, and choosing which items deserved to go to the chopping block and which should be preserved was not easy.

The Hollywood scenario in my head was that my library was the last library left on earth, and I was the librarian who had to decide what would stay and what would go. What a responsibility! Of course, I knew

I wasn't literally the only person deciding what was worth keeping in the literary canon and what deserved to be culled, but I took my little piece of responsibility for what the public library goers of the Tulsa, Oklahoma area would see was worth keeping in a library very seriously.

Nevertheless, for each single should-I-weed-or-should-I-save book on my list, there were at least 99 more that were neither award-winning, by known authors, nor even mentioned in *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia*. (Not to mention the stained covers, crumbly pages, etc.) In other words, I felt pretty safe in believing that the literary canon, or my tiny corner of responsibility for it, was safe.

It should have been a snap. It should have been a party. Unlike my earlier weeding periods, in which I grimly gritted my teeth and thought of England, I should have been riding a wave of elation every day as I tore through storage because I knew I was on the side of the angels. My cause was righteous, and I had the <u>CREW manual</u> to prove it (Larson 2008).

Yet something surprising happened as I started to weed, and didn't stop until it was over: I was overwhelmed with all the usual negative feelings of yore. Guilt. Sorrow. Regret, anguish, angst: you name it, I felt it. Despite common sense, logical reasoning, moral authority, and practical necessity (our library is closing for renovation soon and our collections must be drastically reduced for the new space), I found the task heartbreaking, difficult, and mostly miserable. I felt like I was murdering the in-flesh Sir Walter Scott, not just copies of his works.

Why was it so hard?

You won't find the answer in searching the library literature about deselection. (Nicholson Baker's 2001 *Double Fold* is a notable exception, though he is writing more toward librarians than as a library insider. I'll circle back to him at the very, very end.) Sure, you'll find quick mentions of the "considerably less fun jobs of continuous evaluation and deselection" (Gregory 2011, 126) and the brief acknowledgement that "weeding is personally difficult for many librarians because of their innate love of books" (Dilevko 2003, 93), but mostly you'll find practical articles, web sites, manuals, and books that explain how to determine what to withdraw (Larson 2008; Disher 2007; Roy 1990), who should weed, why weeding is necessary, when weeding should happen, how certain libraries handled weeding projects (Banks 2002), and what to say to communities about weeding projects so there won't be a backlash (McCormack 2008).

I was temporarily fooled by the title of one article, "The Dark Side of Collection Management" (Ward 2008), but it turned out that it never addressed the dark side I was especially interested in. The first time I tackled deselection in my library, Merle Jacob's "Weeding the Fiction Collection: Or Should I Dump *Peyton Place*?" (2001) was particularly helpful because it was specifically about fiction in a public library. But even this terrific article, while addressing nearly every other aspect of withdrawing books, elides over the *withdrawer*, especially the very real emotional agony that many librarians experience as they complete this important yet odious task.

Oh, the Feels!

It is my contention that weeding a library collection, while an absolutely essential part of collection management, is a much more complex issue than library literature—and library practitioners—would like to admit. It is not just an intellectual and physical process but an *emotional* one, wedded to deep psychological, cultural, and even metaphysical issues. Furthermore, the emotions involved are often messy, wild, contradictory, and mired in questions of identity, community, and morality. In other words, it's the kind of issues library and information science researchers tend to shy away from because they

don't easily lend themselves to charts and numbers and the siren call of "objective" truth.

But we must face the fact that weeding means more than we think it does. Pretending that it's only a matter of improving circulation statistics, even the loftier goals of making a collection more accessible to our users or preserving cultural artifacts for future generations, gives an incomplete picture of the process. Furthermore, it can invalidate the very real feelings of those doing the weeding.

This is an uncomfortable set of concepts for librarians to accept. We're thinkers, not feelers! We work from our frontal lobes, thank you very much. The very suggestion that emotion plays a part in our decisions is anathema to our conception of ourselves as clearheaded, dispassionate professionals who use logic and statistics to evaluate our collections and determine the best materials for users.

Perhaps this does not describe you. Perhaps you're an English Literature major like me with a penchant for old-school humanist psychologists like Carl Rogers, or you reject the worn out subjective-objective dichotomy I've set up. Okay, you may be thinking: of course librarians are not unfeeling automatons; we can think *and* feel and do our jobs well, and weeding is both intellectual and emotional. So what? Why explore the deeper reasons that weeding can be so difficult, then?

I wish I could say it's because I want to formulate an action plan to make weeding an easier process for librarians and take away some of the anguish and guilt. Maybe one day I'll get around to writing a self-help guide ("When Librarians Love Too Much: How to Say Goodbye to Your Book Friends Without Tears"), complete with suggestions for a cleansing deselection ritual along the lines of a reality TV game show ("You have been checked out permanently; goodbye!"). But what I am more interested in doing right now is paying witness to what has only been fleetingly referred to in the official library record. I want to call attention to the deeper meanings of weeding, and recognize and legitimize why it can be so darned difficult.

In other words: I want to dig into the real "dark side" of deselection so I won't feel so bad about feeling bad when I weed.

In the spirit of a philosophical rather than logical exploration, here are some of the emotional, metaphysical, anthropological, and psychoanalytical reasons I believe weeding is difficult for librarians:

Reason #1: We're all hoarders at heart. (And by "we," I mean human beings.)

It is de rigueur to declare, "To be human is to [fill in the blank]": laugh, wear funny hats, sing Katy Perry songs, think, mourn. But one way to complete that statement that appears to be indisputably, uniquely human is "own stuff." Indeed, Jean Paul Sartre identified three major forms of human existence: to do, to be, and *to have* (my emphasis). (Interestingly, the three states often get intermingled in unexpected ways—more on that later.)

In 2010, after nearly 20 years of dedicated research into compulsive hoarding—including extensive interviews and therapeutic interventions with numerous patients—Dr. Randy Frost and Dr. Gail Steketee, professors of psychology and social work, respectively, wrote *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (2010). Long before the television show "Hoarders," Dr. Frost and Dr. Steketee were wrestling with why some people collected so many objects (and sometimes animals) that it ruined their lives. These hoarding behaviors made it impossible to work, have meaningful romantic and family relationships, or engage in other life-enriching activities.

While the profiles of the hoarders they discuss show just how different these patients are from non-

hoarders, the difference is mostly in degree, not in the basic desire to accumulate possessions. As they write, "The boundaries between normal and abnormal blur when it comes to hoarding. We all become attached to our possessions and save things other people wouldn't. So we all share some of the hoarding orientation" (14). Evidence for this assertion is found in junk drawers, overstuffed garages, and storage units across the country.

Now, a library's collection of books is different in particulars from an individual's household collection of newspapers, tin cans, shoes, and other objects. For one, a library collection is paid for and owned by an institution, not one person, while personal accumulations include a variety of objects, not just books or other information sources. But in broad strokes, both library collections and individual groups of possessions share the same common denominator of springing from the impulse *to have*. Furthermore, the larger reasons libraries want *to have* are often eerily similar to the larger reasons individuals want *to have*. Which takes us to the next reason deselection can be difficult...

Reason #2: We infuse objects (in this case, books) with deeper meanings, particularly with identity.

Who we are (or who we think we are, or, in an Alice-In-Wonderland kind of way, who we think we want others to think we are) is often shown through what we own. For example: I wear purple patterned tights to show my quirky personality and desire for nonconformity; the fellow sitting next to you at the stoplight drives a Prius to let others see that he is both successful and green; my niece wears a treble-clef necklace and an "Orch Dork" t-shirt to show others she is a string musician with a bent for geek-ery.

Equating possessions with identity is not a new idea by any means, but it was first popularized by William James and further taken up by psychologists and cultural anthropologists to explain the relationship between inanimate objects and the deeper meanings humans attach to them. As James wrote, "It is clear that between what a man calls <u>me</u> and what he simply calls <u>mine</u> the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves" (quoted in Frost 2010, 48).

More than a century later, in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (1981), Mihaly Cziksentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton continued this exploration of the role of objects in a person's definition of who they are, who they have been, and who they wish to become: "Past memories, present experiences, and future dreams of each person are inextricably linked to the objects that comprise his or her environment" (ix) and can have a significant part in not just reflecting but creating the self. Indeed, they go even further and conflate objects with the self, arguing that while it is easy to think of objects as expressions of the self, it is more difficult to admit that the things one uses are in fact part of one's self; not in any mystical or metaphorical sense but in cold, concrete actuality. My old living-room chair with its worn velvet fabric, musty smell, creaking springs, and warm support has often shaped signs in my awareness. These signs are part of what organizes my consciousness, because my self is inseparable from the sign process that constitutes consciousness. That chair is as much part of my self as anything can possibly be (Cziksentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 14).

Once again, equating an individual owning particular objects (purple tights, Prius, treble-clef necklace) and a library owning particular books or information resources (Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, schematics for an oil pipeline, city directories from 1906) may seem like a stretch—until you consider how each case of ownership attempts to express a deeper meaning of a particular identity.

Let's back up. Consider that librarians with collection development duties take this responsibility seriously. Creating and maintaining a useful collection that fulfills the library's and, in the case of

academic libraries, the college or university's, overarching mission is one of the pillars of librarianship. Librarians want the collections they are stewarding to represent the best information in the best way for a particular population, the intended users. Another way of explaining what collection librarians do is to say that they create an identity for their libraries through the objects that make up that collection.

For example, taken as a whole, an "urban fiction" paperback collection at a public library has a very different identity than a topographical map collection at a technical college's library. Just as objects help define individuals, so particular books in a collection help define a library's larger "self."

In *Stuff*, one profiled hoarder, Irene (who, interestingly enough, completed an MLIS degree and was a well-respected cataloguer, though this position hastened her hoarding difficulties, as she often brought home old newspapers her library had weeded), illustrates the possessions-as-identity idea—as well as its ultimate conundrum when it comes to deselection (in her case, clearing her house of piles of old newspapers and other objects): "If I throw too much away, there'll be nothing left of me" (99). No wonder weeding a library's collection can often feel like cutting off one's limbs! In some metaphysical or, at the very least, metaphorical way, it's like carving off little bits of the institutional identity we've created and letting them die. The fear that doing so will kill that identity (so there's "nothing left of me") can be crippling.

Reason #3: We don't want to squander Possibility... or mess with History.

Hoarders are often pegged as lacking in some way (not having the ability to discern between treasure and trash, for example), but Dr. Frost and Dr. Steketee turn that around and argue that hoarders in fact have something others don't: a unique ability to "look at [objects] and see limitless potential, limitless utility, and limitless waste" (15). In the case of Irene, who was so concerned that getting rid of her objects would negate who she was, "things represented opportunity and a chance to experience all that life had to offer" (43).

For example, she did not want to throw away a scrap of paper with an unknown phone number on it, even though she didn't know what it was for, because it might be a number that would lead to something important for her.

Librarians who are hesitant to discard items often have the same impulse: if I eliminate this particular book about magic tricks out of the collection, will it mean that some child won't learn the one special trick that might help her get interested in magic, which might then allow her to be accepted by other children? If I weed this book about Catholic death rituals in 14th-century Italy, will I be preventing some graduate student from completing his thesis research on time? These may seem like ridiculous scenarios, but that does not mean librarians don't spin tales like this as they touch each book and decide whether it should stay or go. (I can't be the only one who does this!)

What fascinates me about this is that, for librarians, the hesitancy is all for the sake of others. We're not the ones who want to learn the magic tricks or delve into 14th-century Catholic rituals, but we want to preserve that possibility for people we might not ever meet. Again, it is our professional responsibility as collection management librarians that compels us to consider the future (and current) interests of others.

The other side of the idea that "the children are our future" is that the rich troves of knowledge from the past deserve passionate advocates willing to ensure their survival. We must save the books for the sake of posterity! There is nothing wrong with this aspiration. Indeed, it's a bedrock library value to preserve resources (particularly books) that represent the knowledge, culture, and history for those not yet born. It becomes a problem when that impulse is magnified and metastasized into the library version of "Grey

Gardens," either through perfectionism or an inability to discriminate between what posterity would like to keep and what best belongs in history's dustbin.

Finally, some writers and philosophers identify the instinct for amassing collections (whether of paintings, Tom Cruise memorabilia, or, of course, books) as a way to lessen fear of death. By accumulating and curating a collection that will live on after you are gone, you are in some way transmitting part of yourself (remember: we conflate objects with our identity) to the future (Frost and Steketee 2010, 55). If this is so, is it really that far-fetched to see that weeding a library collection can feel like facing our own death? And can we honestly not understand that holding on to the items in the collection is a twisted (if unacknowledged) way to defy death?

Reason #4: The more books we have, the safer and more secure we feel.

Fear is a primal (some would say *the* primal) emotion deeply embedded into both human psyches and brains. Neuroscientists have located the structures (<u>the amygdalae</u>) where fear is processed as right above the deepest and most primitive part of the brain—newer than the structures that control breathing and circulation, but evolutionarily ancient compared to the logical, thinking parts. There are numerous popular works that explain this; one of my favorites, despite the author's <u>recent professional difficulties</u>, is Jonah Lehrer's *How We Decide* (2009).

Fear does not only occur as a response to an imminent threat such as a rattlesnake on the walking path in front of you. The opposite feeling of safety occurs for many because there are environmental signals—a smiling grandmother, dinner on the table—that assuages our fears. Therefore, for many people, fear can also spring up when those safety signals are taken away.

This is one explanation for why hoarders collect objects in the numbers that they do: the objects send safety signals that make the hoarders feel protected. In *Stuff*, Irene serves as another example of this principle. When having a difficult day or week, she just wants "to come home and gather my treasures around me" in order to feel better (Frost and Steketee 2010, 83-85).

In the case of librarians and library collections, we, too, tend to feel safer when our collection numbers are robust, and for good reason. The "numbers game" has been identified as a barrier to deselection in libraries, though more for intellectual than emotional reasons. The quantity of books in a library's collection is used as an indication of quality for external purposes. As Gregory, summarizing Slote, explains: "Numbers of books and other items are time-honored criteria used in standards of accreditation as well as internal reports and decision making" (121). If a library reduces its numbers by weeding books, it can impact how the community and leaders view it, leading to less funding or loss of accreditation. The simple equation ends up being "More books = Better library."

While this is an intellectual argument involving a "reliance on seemingly objective statistics and numbers" (Gregory 2011, 121), the emotional component that supports accumulating high numbers of books is intriguing to consider. How much is preserving collection numbers a way to survive budget cuts and communicate quality, and how much is a matter of being able to "gather our treasures" around us? Most librarians will admit that walking through one's full (and neatly straightened) stacks can often produce a powerful feeling of satisfaction—one might even say *safety*.

Reason #5: We don't want to waste resources.

A final word about how cheap librarians are. (By which I mean: concerned about environmental sustainability and reducing waste, of course!) On the Venn diagram of hoarders and most librarians, this

is an area in which the circles overlap. Just as hoarders are monumentally concerned about wasting items that might still have utility, librarians often feel that throwing away books is throwing away money. We might as well turn on all of our lights, trade in our Prius for a gas-guzzling SUV, and start a bonfire stoked by our new purchases!

Concluding Emotions

It's been a year since I finished weeding my library's storage collection of adult fiction. Given all of the angst and guilt and regret I felt at the time, how do I feel now? Pretty darn great, as it turns out. I'm not sure what lesson this provides exactly, though I do know the further I am away from the experience, the easier it is to concentrate on all of those shiny happy benefits of weeding that library literature promises. In fact, it feels a little bit like surviving a five-mile hike through a massive thunderstorm: I'm sure glad it's over, and maybe next time I'll remember to wear some rain gear. Considering all of the emotional reasons why weeding can be fraught with difficulty is a kind of philosophical umbrella for me: it lets me feel my feelings (as the kindly television children's host Mr. Rogers might have said) and then do my job anyway.

It also helps to know that most, if not all, of the books I've weeded now go to Better World Books, an online organization that sells our cast-offs and gives my library a return on what is purchased. Which means Sir Walter Scott's injury might have been a mere flesh wound. Perhaps some other reader is enjoying his adventures and keeping him alive.

A Coda

I completed this essay last December as the final paper for a graduate class in Collection Development for my MLIS degree. My professor made a number of useful and cogent comments, including the suggestion that I bring in a description of Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, an impassioned plea for libraries not to discard collections, particularly newspapers and other periodicals. I had to laugh, because, the week after I completed the paper (but before I received my professor's comments), I tackled an overdue personal weeding project: winnowing my own collection of way-too-many books. Guess what book I decided I would probably not ever get around to reading and should donate to Goodwill? If it weren't so perfectly ironic, I'd be pretty emotional about that.

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