

Discarded

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Essay  
Silver Arts 2023

## Discarded

They lay there in piles, more than 200 of them. Some were not even five years old while others showed the ravages of time. They were not meant to be left like that, exposed to the elements, but they were. Anyone walking by could see them in their discarded state as they waited on a loading dock for their turn at disposal.

This is not some post-apocalyptic tale, or an exposé on the destruction of secret files. Nor is it a scene from a documentary on a horrific genocide. It is the last chapter in the life of a library book.

It is hard to believe that books can be treated in such a cavalier manner. After all, the topic of banning books is back in the news. People are horrified that some books are deemed unsuitable for a library with protests organized to decry the process. Books have been burned by totalitarian regimes as a way of erasing points of view that they find unacceptable. In each of these cases, they are seen as something intolerable in a free society.

But it is perfectly okay to throw a book away.

These cast-off volumes on the loading dock once adorned the shelves at the public library. Once upon a time, these books had been selected for purchase so they could join the library's collection. Chances are, each was proudly displayed upon arrival alongside other new acquisitions in a prominent place. They sat there waiting for a member of the public to notice them, borrow them, read them, and then return them for the next patron's use.

Apparently, the term "shelf life" does not only apply to foodstuffs. While a bottle of salad dressing may have an expiration date, there is none inside the cover of a book. No one knows for

certain when its time is up. Someone within the library performs the function of judge, jury, and executioner.

There may be a few chances for escape before a book is condemned to a landfill. Inside many libraries, there are books offered for sale at very low, bargain prices. They may be even offered as a giveaway. In some communities, a volunteer organization researches the internet to see if the book has any value. If there is, it can be offered for sale on a website where more can be earned. The money received from that can be plowed back into the purchase of theoretically better choices.

Eventually, no matter how many possibilities there are, some books will not be claimed, or even offered a chance at a new life. That means the usefulness of that particular book no longer exists, and disposal is the only remaining option. That is why piles of books were seen sitting outside waiting to be discarded during the weekly visit of the trash man.

The process is called “weeding.” Anyone remotely familiar with gardening understands the meaning behind that. A weed is an undesirable. Weeds can threaten the health of the garden or destroy its planned beauty. They do not get transplanted to be offered another chance at life. For the fastidious gardener, there is only one fate for the weed and that is complete eradication.

In library collections, some books become weeds.

For those that were seen on the loading dock, rooting through them revealed their diversity. No one wants to read the final report of the 9/11 Commission? The autobiography of Esther Williams? Tips for a better golf game? Cooking in the Cajun style? Novels filled with evil, or romance, or laughter? Every part of the Dewey Decimal System was represented. If some future reader wanted one of these from this particular library, they would be too late.

There were so many of them that they had to be disposed of in stages. Apparently, each week, a couple dozen would be tossed in a trashcan along with other bits of garbage so that the city sanitation department could haul them away. Filling the bin with too many books might be too heavy. The work of authors who probably slaved to get their words into print end up indiscriminately tossed in a landfill next to non-literary refuse from throughout the region.

Sadness comes from that realization. As someone who writes, it was painful to see books being tossed out. Whether it is a novel, short story, history, romance, written for children, or any other category, that written work represents a physical extension of us as writers. We make ourselves vulnerable when we share our efforts. The greatest hope is that our words will resonant with a reader. None of us want to think that our attempts are eventually doomed to a dump or reduced back to a pulp to be recycled.

Authors spent part of their lives to bring that creation to life. Perhaps publication was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream. Depths of creativity were mined to make it a reality. But it is not just the work of that one person that is bring tossed out. Other hands played a part to bring it into being. Agents worked to find a publisher, editors guided the polishing process, marketing people developed a strategy to bring it out, graphic designers create intriguing covers, and retail outlets worked to seal the eventual purchase.

Some people will say that nothing lasts forever. Great literature does. Shakespeare, the Greek tragedies, Dickens, Orwell, Hugo, Dostoyevsky all remain on the shelf. Even some without the description of "great" survive. Two full shelves in one library are filled with nothing but Stephen King. His chances at immortality seem strong. When asked if a King novel were ever discarded, a librarian responded, "Oh yes. His books get worn out and then we buy new copies." His life will go on.

What sin was committed by these books that condemned these books to the trash pile? A major reason is lack of circulation. Despite the best intention of a librarian, the book did not receive the attention necessary for it to continue. Some of them may have started out as popular, but then slipped into the status of a nonentity. In the pre-computer days, a book's life could be seen inside its cover. A slip of paper was glued there where the librarian would stamp the due date. Its columns might have been filled, letting the reader know they had selected something others had already enjoyed. If it was the first stamp, or there were few others, it might be more suspect.

Today, the life that book is leading remains a mystery. Only the person scanning it with the attached barcode knows the existence it has led. The patron could be the first, or the thirty-first. In some cases, they may be the last.

Another possible reason behind the transformation to being a weed in the library garden is out of date material. This would be particularly true for reference books, books related to technology, or any other field where developments are ongoing. Being current when sharing information is of great importance. When the information is out of date, then the expiration date on the shelf life is hit.

The American Library Association website has a page dedicated to the weeding process. Besides providing some basic information, there are sample policies for public, academic, and school library weeding procedures. The public library is the only category that includes the possibility of the book being offered to the patrons through a sale. For school libraries, it recommends that there be a policy regarding how the weeded materials are to be disposed.

Having worked in schools for almost four decades, the process I saw most often was books were left out on a table to be given away. They didn't last long as teachers would swoop in



and pick through them. Many of those books were then put in classroom closets to be discovered later after the teacher retired. It wasn't unusual for another teacher to then pick them up and stash them in their own closet. After generations of shifting, the custodian would eventually be called to cart them off.

The academic libraries have the most thorough process. Multiple experts may be called upon to weigh in on the fate of materials. The library dean, an academic expert, faculty from the implicated department, and other disciplines may all have a voice. The ALA website indicates that many academic libraries follow a system referred to as MUSTIE for decision-making. This acronym stands for misleading, ugly, superseded, trivial, irrelevant, or obtained elsewhere. The assumption is they wanted a clever acronym which is why "ugly" was used to represent worn out materials. Lucky for us, there is not a similar system for humans.

While the sight of piles of books waiting to be sent off to the city dump may be depressing, it does not mean the title itself is erased forever. Other libraries may still possess it, or it may be in the Library of Congress. Looking on-line for some of the seen titles waiting to be taken away revealed them available in multiple locations. Used bookstores and e-commerce sites are dedicated to old or out of print books. Digital versions of books may mean that the lifespan of the title is infinite.

Still, it seems wrong to see books treated like spoiled food, old wrapping paper, tin cans, and other bits of garbage. Before Guttenberg's invention, and for many centuries after, books were treasures. They were not always available to everyone which enhanced their special place in people's lives. Books transfer knowledge and pass on culture to future generations. That is why book banning or burning are repugnant to so many. Weeding, though, is acceptable and encouraged.

Today, books and humans share the common bond that our ultimate demise is caused by a lack of circulation. At least, we as people do not have to meet the standards of MUSTIE. How many of us would survive the weeding process?