

Hello everyone, and welcome back to This is Berthoud. I am Amie, your local librarian, and this is the show where I get to talk about everything that you are talking about so that together we all have something new to think about. Today's topic hits close to home for us here at the library, because today we're talking about what items do or do not make it onto the library shelves and how that relates to banning books. Several states in the last couple of years have introduced laws that have proposed firing or even incarcerating librarians for having certain books on library shelves. So we're going to talk about selecting books and movies, how we decide when to get rid of them, and why you should be incredibly concerned when other people are banning or attempting to ban books so that you can't access them.

Collection maintenance, selecting and deselecting materials, ordering books, weeding, all of these are inevitable and necessary parts of maintaining a library. It's simple—we have a finite budget to spend, and a finite amount of space in our building to house items. We cannot purchase every book or movie that's ever been released, we cannot purchase every new book or movie that gets released each year, and even if we could, we definitely couldn't store every single item that the library has ever purchased in our building. So that means that, simply by virtue of operating a functional public library, we have to make decisions all the time about what we will purchase and what we will get rid of. We call that collection development, fancy professional jargon for ensuring that we have what people want and don't waste precious shelf space on things our community members won't use.

It's always tricky trying to find the balance between things that our community wants versus things that our community needs. The nice thing about being a public library instead of a school is that there is no assigned curriculum, and we get to hand people things that they enjoy and that they want to read or watch. But sometimes we also get to push people a little bit, to get them to consider a different viewpoint or style than what they normally consume. This means we have to have things that may not be considered "popular" by our community's standards, but nevertheless are things we like to encourage people to read or watch. We're also incredibly grateful to be part of a larger library consortium, up to 130 libraries now, because the consortium allows our community to have access to over 1.3 million items instead of just the 24,000 or so housed in our own building. So even if we don't have something right on hand, we can almost always order it in from another library.

Does anything go at the library? No, actually. We don't purchase anything that's rated X, and our computers have filters installed that are designed to block pornography. Are filters perfect? No, they are not. Are they better than nothing? Arguably yes. If you're one of those people who comes to the

library and tries to work around the filter—just stop. If you're going to claim it "just popped up on my screen, I didn't search for that"—again, just stop.

Do we stay away from controversial topics? Absolutely not! Topics like politics, religion, money, all of those may not be appropriate for holiday dinners with the extended family, but they're definitely appropriate here at the library. And our goal is not to make everyone in the community think the way we do about any of these topics. That assumes that there's agreement among library staff members, and that's not often the case either. Instead, it's our job to make sure you have access to the resources you need to form your own educated opinion about these things. If we're doing it right, you'll find things you agree with and things you disagree with, but in general our job is to provide you with things that will make you think.

Let's talk a little bit about what our policy officially calls "deselection of materials," more commonly and affectionately referred to as "weeding the library." Some people get mad when they find out that the library gets rid of items. Like I said before, if we kept every book, movie, audiobooks, magazine, paperback, board game, piece of technology, and so on that the library had ever purchased, we could be featured on an episode of Hoarders and no one would be able to use the library. There are several criteria that we use to determine when it's time to donate or recycle the library's materials.

First, some items deselect themselves. I wish I could say that everyone who checks things out treats them with respect, but that's not true, and even for those who do, sometimes accidents happen. I once had someone come in with a Ziploc full of confetti. Turns out that confetti was about half a library book—the dog had swallowed the rest of it. If an item is returned and it's soaking wet or moldy, or if someone scribbled all over it, or there are pages falling out, that tells us that we either need to reorder that item or, if it's not all that popular anymore, it can simply be weeded out of the collection. Pro tip for all of you: if you damage a library item and you own up to it, we'll work with you on replacement costs and so forth. If you damage a library item and you tell me, "It was like that when I got it..." We're probably going to charge you the full replacement cost every time. We like to be kind, but we're not required to play stupid.

Sometimes we weed items out of our collection because they've been superseded. As a for example, let's look at the kids' books about outer space. Remember when Pluto was a planet? First Pluto was a planet, then Pluto was not a planet, then we weren't sure for a bit if we could call Pluto a planet, and now Pluto is officially not a planet. That means all the books that start with, "Pluto is a planet in our

solar system,” have been superseded by books that say, “We used to consider Pluto a planet in our solar system.” The pace at which research is being conducted in different areas can make our materials become outdated at different rates. Books or documentaries about Mars are being produced much faster than books or documentaries about Neptune, so the rate at which our materials become outdated isn’t constant. That just adds an extra layer of fun for us.

And finally, we are not an archive. That means that we don’t keep everything we’ve ever owned, and a solid piece of criteria for us is whether or not an item is being used. No one’s read that book in three years? It can probably go. This movie’s been sitting untouched for two years? It can make room for something new that people are interested in seeing right now. There isn’t a single overarching library standard for how long an item can sit unused before it gets weeded, but we consider ourselves a popular materials library, and if it isn’t currently popular then it doesn’t get to use up our precious shelf space. Shelves that are less full are easier to browse also. They’ve done studies, folks, and figured out that two-thirds to three-quarters full is ideal for a library shelf. Any less, and your brain decides there’s nothing good on that shelf, and any more than and your brain gets overwhelmed and won’t even look. That means that when we weed out some items, the rest of them left on the shelf are more likely to be checked out than when the shelves were too full. It sounds crazy, but it’s true.

Now, when you all come into the library, you also get to do your own selecting. There may be books and movies and novels that you have decided are not right for you and not right for your family. That’s perfectly fine, and being selective at the library is great. So when does it change from selection to censorship? It’s actually quite straightforward. Selecting is deciding that something isn’t right for you or your family. Censorship is when someone else decides that something isn’t right for them or their family, and therefore you don’t get to have access to it. That’s when they start proposing laws that would toss librarians in jail for having those items available.

At first glance, some of you may look and think that this isn’t that big of a deal. After all, we can’t expect to find every single thing we’re looking for in the library anyway, so someone has to choose what doesn’t make it. Of course that’s true, but let’s do a little imagination exercise together. Think of that person here in the community who thinks the complete opposite from you on every possible subject. You don’t have to know them particularly well for this to work. It’s the person who speaks up in a PTA meeting and makes you want to roll your eyes, or the person who puts up political signs every election cycle that make you clench your teeth, or the person who practices a religion that is different from yours. Now imagine that instead of me, that person is running the library, and that person is making

sure that the only resources available at the public library for you to use are ones that he or she agrees with. Now how does it feel to you? Are you uncomfortable yet?

Let me reassure any of you who may be nervous. If you are able to practice critical thinking-- if you're able to read or listen to or view something and decide for yourself if the message is compelling and valid-- if you're able to do that, then absolutely nothing in the library can hurt you. When you allow others to censor library materials or ban books, however, you're outsourcing your critical thinking, and any time we allow others to do our critical thinking for us, we get into trouble. There are plenty of places in the world where people in power decide what their citizens can or cannot see, read, hear, have access to. Our ability in the United States to access all manner of materials, even ones that frustrate us or challenge us, is one of our great freedoms. Let's not give it up.

If you have any questions about today's podcast, or anything else for that matter, feel free to get in touch with me, Amie, by emailing podcast.bclid@gmail.com or calling the library at 970-532-2727.

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