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Hello, Grisham -- So Long, Hemingway?

With Shelf Space Prized, Fairfax Libraries Cull Collections

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You can't find "Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings" at the Pohick Regional Library anymore. Or "The Education of Henry Adams" at Sherwood Regional. Want Emily Dickinson's "Final Harvest"? Don't look to the Kingstowne branch.

It's not that the books are checked out. They're just gone. No one was reading them, so librarians took them off the shelves and dumped them.

Along with those classics, thousands of novels and nonfiction works have been eliminated from the Fairfax County collection after a new computer software program showed that no one had checked them out in at least 24 months.

Public libraries have always weeded out old or unpopular books to make way for newer titles. But the region's largest library system is taking turnover to a new level.

Like Borders and Barnes & Noble, Fairfax is responding aggressively to market preferences, calculating the system's return on its investment by each foot of space on the library shelves -- and figuring out which products will generate the biggest buzz. So books that people actually want are easy to find, but many books that no one is reading are gone -- even if they are classics.

"We're being very ruthless," said Sam Clay, director of the 21-branch system since 1982. "A book is not forever. If you have 40 feet of shelf space taken up by books on tulips and you find that only one is checked out, that's a cost."

That is the new reality for the Fairfax system and the future for other libraries. As books on tape, DVDs, computers and other electronic equipment crowd into branches, there is less room for plain old books.

So librarians are making hard decisions and struggling with a new issue: whether the data-driven library of the future should cater to popular tastes or set a cultural standard, even as the demand for the classics wanes.

Library officials say they will always stock Shakespeare's plays, "The Great Gatsby" and other venerable titles. And many of the books pulled from one Fairfax library can be found at another branch and delivered to a patron within a week.

But in the effort to stay relevant in an age in which reference materials and novels can be found on the Internet and Oprah's Book Club helps set standards of popularity, libraries are not the cultural repositories they once were.

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"I think the days of libraries saying, 'We must have that, because it's good for people,' are beyond us," said Leslie Burger, president of the American Library Association and director of Princeton Public Library. "There is a sense in many public libraries that popular materials are what most of our communities desire. Everybody's got a favorite book they're trying to promote."

That leaves some books endangered. In Fairfax, thousands of titles have been pulled from the shelves and become eligible for book sales.

Weeding books used to be sporadic. Now it's strategic. Clay and his employees established the two-year threshold 18 months ago, driven, they say, by a \$2 million cut to the budget for books and materials and the demand for space. More computers and growing demand in branches for meeting space, story hours and other gatherings have left less room for books.

And nowadays, library patrons don't like to sit at big tables with strangers as they read or study. They want to be alone, creating a need for individual carrels that take up even more space. And the popularity of audiovisual materials that must be housed in 50-year-old branches built for smaller collections only adds to the crunch.

To do more with less, Fairfax library officials have started running like businesses. Clay bought state-of-the-art software that spits out data on each of the 3.1 million books in the county system -- including age, number of times checked out and when. There are also statistics on the percentages of shelf space taken up by mysteries, biographies and kids' books.

Every branch gets a printout of the data each month, including every title that hasn't circulated in the previous 24 months. It's up to librarians to decide whether a book stays. The librarians have discretion, but they also have targets, collection manager Julie Pringle said. "What comes in is based on what goes out," she said.

Classics such as Ernest Hemingway's "For Whom the Bell Tolls" and Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" are among the titles that haven't been checked out in two years and could be eliminated. Librarians so far have decided to keep them.

As libraries clear out titles, they sweep in new ones as fast as they can. A two-month-old program called "Hot Picks" is boosting copies of bestsellers by tracking the number of holds requested by patrons. This month, every Fairfax branch will display new books more prominently, leaving even less space for older ones.

"We don't want to keep what people don't use much of," Clay said. Circulation, a sign of prestige and a potential bargaining chip for new funding, is on pace to hit 11.6 million in the Fairfax system this year, part of a steady climb over the past three years.

No other system in the Washington area is tracking circulation as quickly -- or weeding so methodically. Montgomery County, a similar-size suburban system, has not emphasized weeding in several years, said Kay Ecelbarger, who retired last month as chief of collection management.

In the District, library director Ginnie Cooper said she has not tackled weeding and turnover policy in the system, which is struggling to increase circulation. She hopes to address those concerns with a recent infusion of cash from the D.C. Council.

There are no national standards on weeding public library collections.

As Fairfax bets its future on a retail model, some librarians say that the public library may be straying

too far from its traditional role as an archive of literature and history.

Arlington County's library director, Diane Kresh, said she's "paying a lot of attention to what our customers want." But if they aren't checking out Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," she's not only keeping it, she's promoting it through a new program that gives forgotten classics prominent display.

"Part of my philosophy is that you collect for the ages," Kresh said. "The library has a responsibility to provide a core collection for the cultural education of its community." She comes to this view from a career at the Library of Congress, where she was chief of public service collections for 30 years.

The weight of the new choices falls on the local librarian. That's especially hard at the Woodrow Wilson branch in Falls Church, one of the smallest in the Fairfax system. It's a vibrant place popular with Latino and Middle Eastern immigrants, the elderly and young professionals. Branch manager Linda Schlekau, who has 20 years of experience, says she discards about 700 books a month.

"Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill" sat on the top shelf of a cart in the back room one day in late December, wedged between Voltaire's "Candide" and "Broke Heart Blues" by Joyce Carol Oates. The cart brimmed with books that someone on Schlekau's staff had pulled from the shelves. Sometimes she has time to give them another look before wheeling them to the book-sale pile. Sometimes she doesn't.

The Oates would return to the shelf, "because she's a real popular author at Woodrow Wilson," even if "Broke Heart Blues" isn't, Schlekau said. The Voltaire would go. An obscure Edgar Allan Poe volume called "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket" might be transferred to another branch.

Schlekau hesitated over the volume of O'Neill plays, which was in good condition but had been checked out only nine times in its lifespan at the library, falling short of the system's new goal of 20. She sighed. "The only time things like this are going out is if they're [performing the plays] at the Kennedy Center."

But, she said, she's disinclined to throw O'Neill into the discard pile: "That's the English major in me."

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