

Where Have All the Thirkells Gone?

by Margaret Miles

It's a familiar phrase to anyone who has ever watched a Presidential inauguration: "Preserve, protect, and defend." Just as the President is supposed to safeguard the Constitution, we as librarians are supposed to be caring for our collections — and I think that most of the time, the protecting and the defending go along pretty well. What most libraries have forgotten about doing entirely is the first of the President's promises: the promise to preserve.

Now, before the entire combined memberships of the Documents Section and the Round Table on Special Collections try to wrestle me down and lock me away forever in an acid-free archival storage box safely out of harm's way, YOU'RE NOT THE ONES I MEAN!!!! Calm down, folks! My concern lies in an entirely different area.

It's not the unique, original, irreplaceable holographic documents of incalculable historical significance. It's all those wonderful books the likes of which nobody writes anymore. And the problem is that most of them aren't accessible through libraries anymore, either.

Every so often all of us who are trueborn Readers with a capital "R" develop a book-related crisis. Let me give you an example. I recently finished reading Connie Willis's excellent science fiction short story collection, *Impossible Things*. (Great book, by the way. All libraries serving intelligent science fiction readers should have it.) And being fairly obsessive about these things, I didn't just read all the stories, I read the fine print, and the fine print included a dedication which mentioned two women. One is a Mrs. Jones whom I don't know, but the other is Lenora Mattingly Weber.

Those of you who don't remember the teen novels of a kinder, gentler era may not remember her either, but she wrote a lengthy series of books about the Malone family. These books are a portrait of the period in which a high school girl's biggest worry was making her own prom dress in home ec class. My library's copy of *Something Borrowed, Something Blue* has "Marvey Keen" written on the flyleaf, which capsulizes the whole reading experience pretty well, actually. The last time I had a Lenora Mattingly Weber emergency, it took six months and interlibrary loans from half a dozen libraries as far away as North Dakota before I managed to track down the whole series. How many libraries since that time a couple of years ago have practiced "responsible collection development" and weeded Lenora because they think she's obsolete and nobody wants to read her books anymore? Will I be able to track down *Beany Malone* again, or is she gone forever?

Or take the Thirkell problem. Angela Thirkell was a deliciously batty English lady novelist who wrote a novel a year for a quarter century. As Mrs. Morland, a novelist character in the Thirkell series, is fond of saying of her own work, each of these books are exactly the same except they're all different. How many libraries recently have decided that these books are forgotten and unread, and cleared them away to allow Danielle Steel on the one side and Robert James Waller on the other to expand into a vacuum which those bestseller list fixtures are utterly unequipped to fill? From all over the country, my inner ear can hear the pathetic, wistful cries of Thirkell novels being extirpated.

Lenora and Angela aren't the only casualties in the anti-preservation massacre, of course, just a couple of the latest ones I'm worried about. If it's hard enough to find Mrs. Thirkell now, how much harder is it to find the adult novels of Frances Hodgson Burnett? (Yes, indeed, she wrote something other than *The Secret Garden*. Did she ever! *The Making of a Marchioness* is the kind of reading experience no author has produced in nearly a century.)

So all of you who've been thinking of going out this morning to do a nice, thorough weed through that "unwanted, unread" fiction, please think again. Some of us do read it, and we have no hope for the future if some libraries don't make the choice to preserve for us those books the like of which nobody is able to write anymore. And if you turn your weeding cart into that aisle toward the end of the fiction and see that some protester has chained herself to one of the shelves and is holding a placard that says, "Librarian, spare that Thirkell!" — don't be surprised. That'll be me.

COUNTER POINT



Why Let the Dust Settle?

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

Once again my allergies are acting up, and I'm convinced it has absolutely nothing to do with the beautiful azaleas and dogwood blossoms springing up all over southeastern North Carolina. The culprits are those old and musty books that Margaret and her friends think libraries must preserve at all costs.

Now I know many of you like a good old-fashioned read once in a while, but is it really worth all the dust and visual pollution to house these titles on expensive and limited library shelving? And as if the dust weren't enough, I really don't think most of us want to read these books in bed. After all, they're so brittle it would divert attention away from the cookie crumbs I usually leave behind in my latest novel. Heaven forbid, but wouldn't it be easier just to read that old classic from your laptop anyway?

That's not to say someone might not want to actually read a book that wasn't a movie first. It's just that it's so, so *bizarre!* It's hard to imagine any library devoting such valuable space to its more, shall we say, eccentric readers. After all, wouldn't most people rather read the new LaVyrle Spencer romance or the latest Sue Grafton mystery than some old standard like James Gould Cozzens and Phoebe Atwood Taylor, whom only a few bibliophiles recall?

But I don't want to get into an argument over reading tastes. I know that most classics majors, children's librarians, and catalogers read "better" books than most circulation and reference librarians ever will. And I'm perfectly willing to admit that even most administrators (the few who still use libraries of course) are considerably more pedestrian in their taste. But who has the time even to search out these classics, much less read them, when we all have a hard enough time finding a few minutes in the day that we can devote to real pleasure reading.

But, I want to focus on the hidden costs of preservation, the real impact that restoring and actually preserving these titles would have on any library if we were all to stop everything and actually resist the temptation to weed the seldom, if rarely, used titles from our collections. First, there is the *time*. I mean the time necessary to train and educate collection development librarians to recognize these classics, retain them, and promote their use. We all know it's a lot easier merely to check a title's circulation history than it is to evaluate its worth to the collection when weeding fiction.

Secondly, what about library book sales? Many of our most dedicated users can't wait for the next used book sale. While donations seem to be quite popular in these sales, many shoppers nevertheless come specifically for the item they were tempted to *borrow* indefinitely just last week. If we actually stopped weeding these things, what would happen to circulation? Would we be inundated with lost-and-pays and those dreaded claims returned? Certainly the impact on library operations must be considered before we preserve those esoteric titles just because a few purists *might* enjoy reading them.

Finally, think of the ramifications that any serious program of preservation would have at budget time. How will libraries ever again be able to convince funding agencies that we need an increase in the book budget? Most uninformed officials usually think that the library has enough books already, so why does it possibly need more? What would happen to that tried and true response that we need new books because that's what people want?

No, Margaret, I'm sorry, but maybe the best we can offer you is interlibrary loan. After all, we have made that commitment to sharing resources on the new information highway, and you know what a commitment means!

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