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Libraries See Opening as Bookstores Close

By KAREN ANN CULLOTTA

At the bustling public library in Arlington Heights, Ill., requests by three patrons to place any title on hold prompt a savvy computer tracking system to order an additional copy of the coveted item. That policy was intended to eliminate the frustration of long waits to check out best sellers and other popular books. But it has had some unintended consequences, too: the library's shelves are now stocked with 36 copies of "Fifty Shades of Grey."

Of course, librarians acknowledge that when patrons' passion for the sexy series lacking in literary merit cools in a year or two, the majority of volumes in the "Fifty Shades" trilogy will probably be plucked from the shelves and sold at the Friends of the Library's used-book sales, alongside other poorly circulated, donated and out-of-date materials.

"A library has limited shelf space, so you almost have to think of it as a store, and stock it with the things that people want," said Jason Kuhl, the executive director of the Arlington Heights Memorial Library. Renovations will turn part of the library's first floor into an area resembling a bookshop that officials are calling the Marketplace, with cozy seating, vending machines and, above all, an abundance of best sellers.

As librarians across the nation struggle with the task of redefining their roles and responsibilities in a digital age, many public libraries are seeing an opportunity to fill the void created by the loss of traditional bookstores. They are increasingly adapting their collections and services based on the demands of library patrons, whom they now call customers.

Today's libraries are reinventing themselves as vibrant town squares, showcasing the latest best sellers, lending Kindles loaded with e-books, and offering grass-roots technology training centers. Faced with the need to compete for shrinking municipal finances, libraries are determined to prove they can respond as quickly to the needs of the taxpayers as the police and fire department can.

“I think public libraries used to seem intimidating to many people, but today, they are becoming much more user-friendly, and are no longer these big, impersonal mausoleums,” said Jeannette Woodward, a former librarian and author of “Creating the Customer-Driven Library: Building on the Bookstore Model.”

“Public libraries tread a fine line,” Ms. Woodward said. “They want to make people happy, and get them in the habit of coming into the library for popular best sellers, even if some of it might be considered junk. But libraries also understand the need for providing good information, which often can only be found at the library.”

Cheryl Hurley, the president of the Library of America, a nonprofit publisher in New York “dedicated to preserving America’s best and most significant writing,” said the trend of libraries that cater to the public’s demand for best sellers is not surprising, especially given the ravages of the recession on public budgets.

Still, Ms. Hurley remains confident that libraries will never relinquish their responsibility to also provide patrons with the opportunity to discover literary works of merit, be it the classics, or more recent fiction from novelists like Philip Roth, whose work is both critically acclaimed and immensely popular.

“The political ramifications for libraries today can result in driving the collection more and more from what the people want, rather than libraries shaping the tastes of the readers,” Ms. Hurley said. “But one of the joys of visiting the public library is the serendipity of discovering another book, even though you were actually looking for that best seller that you thought you wanted.”

“It’s all about balancing the library’s mission and its marketing, and that is always a tricky dance,” she added.

While print books, both fiction and nonfiction, still make up the bulk of most library collections — e-books amount to less than 2 percent of many collections in part because some publishers limit their availability at libraries — building renovation plans rarely include expanding shelf space for print products. Instead, many libraries are culling their collections and adapting floor plans to accommodate technology training programs, as well as mini-conference rooms that offer private, quiet spaces frequently requested by self-employed consultants meeting with clients, as well as teenagers needing space to huddle over group projects.

Though an increase in book weeding these days — a practice long known in library parlance as deselection — might be troubling to some bibliophiles, library officials say, many books enjoy a happy life after being sold.

A recent visit to the [Friends of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County Warehouse Sale](#) proved to be not unlike wandering into a reader's nirvana for Jeff Borden, 61. A writer and adjunct professor from Chicago, Mr. Borden said he and his wife, Johanna Brandon, left the November sale with shopping bags brimming with an eclectic and bargain-priced assortment of fiction and nonfiction, including the noir novel "The Leopard," by Jo Nesbo, and "Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde" by Jeff Guinn.

"The books are piling up all over the house," said Mr. Borden, who estimated that the couple spent about \$50, money that officials said will be given to the library system to finance programs including its children's story time.

"Great fiction is still being written, as well as rotten fiction," Mr. Borden added. "To my way of thinking, you need to get them in the door of the library first, and if someone's search for 'Shades of Grey' leads them to read D. H. Lawrence, well, that's not a bad deal."

Gretchen Caserotti, the assistant director for public services at the public library in Darien, Conn., said, "We are terrifically excited about the sea change at libraries, and rethinking our model in a new world."

The Darien library has a three-requests policy similar to the one in Arlington Heights.

"The library should be as they say, a third place — you have home, work or school, and then you come to the library because it is the center and heart of the community," Ms. Caserotti said. "Our staff is 100 percent committed to hospitality, customer service and welcoming people to the library as if they were visiting our home. We need to remember it is their library, not ours, and they are paying for it."



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