The Collection Development Challenges Facing Public Libraries in the Emerging Genres of Erotic Fiction, New Adult and Graphic Novels

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Abstract

The principle objective of this paper is to outline the collection development challenges facing public libraries in the emerging genres of erotic literature, New Adult and graphic novels. These challenges include censorship, balancing patron requests with collection development policy, book challenges, the impact of self-publishing and e-books, cataloging, and location of collections. The importance of forward thinking, willingness to change, and creating a more patron-friendly experience are explored as solutions to these challenges.
The American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom (ALAOIF) defines censorship as “the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons – individuals, groups or government officials – find objectionable or dangerous” (American Library Association, n.d.). The issue of censorship is not a new one for collection development librarians. When E.L. James published her megahit “Fifty Shades of Grey” trilogy this issue was pushed to the forefront of American libraries. The popularity of this once self-published fan fiction left libraries in the position of whether or not to carry the series. According to Barbara Jones (2012), director of ALAOIF, the majority of libraries are not in the “censorship business.” Reports of responses regarding patron requests to remove the series from the shelves took the position “if they found certain materials offensive they didn’t have to read them but they do not have the right to prevent others from doing so” (Jones, 2012). On the other side of this debate are the libraries that found themselves in one of three dilemmas: Wanting to buy the book, removing the book from their shelves, and deciding not to buy the book in the first place (Jones 2012). One example of libraries being on this side of the issue is the Brevard Public Library in east central Florida. The series was pulled from their shelves after library officials determined they were not “appropriate for the public” (Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, 2012). In response, local residents and groups of organizations including the National Coalition Against Censorship and the American Civil Liberties of Florida, sent a letter criticizing the library’s decision (Newsletter on IF, 2012). After what they described as “response to public demand,” and “considerable review and
consideration by the library system,” Brevard County returned the series to the shelves (Kelly et al., 2012).

**Patron Wants and Collection Development Policy**

Even though the publication of the “Fifty Shades of Grey” series sparked censorship controversy in many libraries, librarians could not deny the fact that their patrons wanted it. Many librarians reported more holds than they could remember on a single title, including over 2,000 at Hennepin County Public Library in Minnesota in May 2012 (*Newsletter on IF*, 2012). This demand for erotic material has also compelled libraries to reevaluate their collection development policies. Libraries have had to assess whether or not their collection development policies allow for the inclusion of controversial material. They also have to define their standards on what controversial material is. The “Fifty Shades of Gray” series, as well as similar titles such as Sylvia Day’s “Bared to You,” have not been declared “obscene” by any court of law (Jones, 2012). Jones (2012) also argues that if libraries carry popular fiction, and classic literature, then they “have erotic content in their libraries already.” When reviewing collection development policies, libraries must ask themselves what behavior is acceptable (Lynch, 2012, p.5). Policies must be assessed for whether they allow for controversial materials, or if they make it easier to censor. No matter what the policy, it is only as strong as the library’s ability to uphold it (Lynch, 2012, p. 5).

**New Adult**

**The New Adult Resurgence**
Collection development challenges do not only appear in well-established genres like erotic fiction, but also in less established ones such as New Adult fiction. New Adult fiction came to the attention of the literary world in 2009 as part of a publishing contest run by St. Martin’s Press (jhovanec, 2013). Seen as a marketing tool for eighteen to thirty year old readers, this publishing house thought that the age group could “benefit from titles that revolved around adults trying to find their place in the world with a backdrop that reflected this stage of life” (jhovanec, 2013). This genre has seen a bit of resurgence recently, and libraries are left wondering how to approach it. The renewed interest in this genre has spawned a multitude of blogs and websites devoted it, including “NA Alley: Bridging the Gap Between Young Adult and Adult Fiction” (Donahue, 2013). NA Alley states that “typically, a novel is considered NA (New Adult) if it encompasses the transition between adolescence – a life stage often depicted in Young Adult (YA) fiction – and true adulthood” (“NA Alley”). An emerging genre that is right in the middle of two long-established ones presents challenges in cataloging and marketing for libraries. In recognizing the genre, libraries are doing what they do all the time – keeping their “eyes peeled for the sake of the patron,” and evolving as they deem appropriate (jhovanec, 2013). Even though some libraries are beginning to recognize the genre, they are still confused as to what to do with it. Should there be a New Adult section? Creating a collection that is easy to browse is the main purpose of genre division (jhovanec, 2013). The popularity of Young Adult fiction has also helped propel this New Adult resurgence. Topically, the plots are similar in both genres, but what is different are the settings through which those topics are explored (jhovanec, 2013). Even with their similarities, the demand of the New Adult genre is being boosted by its “mature themes.” A report from ABC News likened young adult stories to “old
Harlequin romances, set in modern times, with younger characters, many of whom are in college, coming of age and often exploring their sexuality” (Chang & Zucker, 2013). This viewpoint also presents challenges to librarians when it comes to deciding where to place these New Adult titles in the library. Even if a section completely dedicated to New Adult fiction is not necessary yet, a working knowledge of titles is (jhovanec, 2013).

**Self-Publishing and eBook Impact**

Self-publishing has also had a major impact on this emerging genre. The perfect example of a self-published author going from digital to print is Jamie McGuire, author of the New Adult novel “Beautiful Disaster.” McGuire has gone from self-publishing to landing a major publisher in Atria, an imprint within Simon & Schuster, Inc. “Beautiful Disaster” has sold more than 500,000 copies and in July, 2012, Warner Bros. optioned it for film (Donahue, 2013). McGuire herself credits the “self-publishing revolution” for her success as well as the explosion of New Adult titles in general (Donahue, 2013). According to her, “bookstores didn’t have a place for novels about college-aged students so publishers were unable to sell it” (Donahue, 2013). McGuire also acknowledges that self-publishing has created a niche where none existed before, filling the gap between Young Adult and commercial women’s fiction readers (Donahue, 2013). Like other self-published works, the popularity of New Adult has spilled over from digital to library shelves. Librarians do their best to fill the needs and wants of their patrons. Adding New Adult titles is another example of this, even though they are faced with the challenges of where to place them.

**Graphic Novels**
Cataloging and Location

Even though graphic novels are not a new genre, their popularity has steadily increased in recent years and so has their collection development challenges. 1986 proved to be a key year for graphic novels. This year included the entire serial run of “The Dark Knight Rises,” the first issue of “Watchmen,” and the first volume of “Maus,” all of which are considered classic graphic novels today (Hoover, 2012, p. 175). Graphic novels were once considered a kind of “cult” reading; however they are now part of mainstream demand (Weiner, 2008, p. 8). One of the challenges of including graphic novels in the library collection is the lack of classification options for them. In Libraries that use the Dewey classification, graphic novels are most often located by the call number 741.5. In Library of Congress classification, all graphic novels are in the call number PS or NC (Pyles, 2012, p. 33). Graphic novels are rarely cataloged and organized on the shelves by author, publisher, and character, or in “any other way that makes them easy to find” (Pyles, 2012, p. 33).

Challenged Material

Graphic novels are not only some of the most frequently circulated materials in Young Adult and teen collections; they are also some of the most often challenged (Creel, 2008, p. 197). Many of the challenges that arise due to graphic novels can be put in the “a picture is worth a thousand words” category. Graphic novels rely mostly on a visual medium to tell their story. Challenges can often result from someone flipping through the graphic novel and “reacting to images without actually reading the book” (Creel, 2008, p. 197). In contrast, many Young Adult and teen fiction titles have more sex, violence, adult language and mature themes, but they
“seldom make the censors’ lists” (Creel, 2008, p. 197). Adult graphic novel titles also pose their own challenges to collection development. Librarians have to be especially diligent in evaluating content of adult graphic novels. Many libraries keep their adult and Young Adult graphic novels separate because of this. According to librarian and comic enthusiast Ryan Claringbole, keeping these collections separate is important, “otherwise you will have a censorship headache since some titles (“Preacher,” “The Boys”) get really bad” (personal communication, May 1, 2013).

Conclusion

Moving Forward

As libraries move forward in the collection development of these emerging genres, diligence and constant evaluation of collection development policies will be essential. Patron requests for erotic literature are not likely to go away which means neither will their challenges. Libraries should continue to work with the American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom if they have difficulties in this area of collection development. According to an ALAOIF official statement in May 2012:

Materials like “Fifty Shades of Grey” challenge libraries’ professional ideals of open, equitable, unbiased access to information. They raise important questions about how libraries can best include and reflect the diversity of ideas in our society – even those which some people find objectionable. In all circumstances, ALA encourages libraries making decisions about their collections to keep in mind their basic missions and the core values of intellectual freedom and providing access to information.”
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With the assistance and support of the ALAOIF, libraries can confidently navigate this up and coming genre. Librarians must be cognizant that their collection development policies are in place to guide decisions about what to select for a collection. This selection is an inclusive process, one that seeks out materials that will “best satisfy the community’s needs for entertainment, information, and enlightenment” (ALAOIF, May 2012).

The Power of Knowledge

Continuing education will be especially important for librarians faced with the collection development of New Adult titles. The self-publishing industry will more than likely continue to be a catalyst for this genre. Librarians in charge of collection development should be aware of the trends in self-publishing, especially in New Adult titles. The popularity of self-publishing will also cause librarians to determine how those titles fit into their library’s collection development policies. Any library with a collection development policy prohibiting self-published material is a policy that “probably needs to be revised in the age of user-created content” (Jones, 2012, p. 21).

New Adult represents an interesting evolution in the library’s world. The incredible popularity of Young Adult fiction is a perfect example of this kind of progression. For those of us in our thirties (including myself), our choices in Young Adult fiction were incredibly limited fifteen years ago. The experience of going from “The Babysitter’s Club, to “Sweet Valley High” to Adult fiction” was common because that was the only choice (Jhovanec, 2013). Technology is also working to propel New Adult to the forefront. The “e-book revolution” has “pushed (New Adult) into the readers’ hands” (Donahue, 2013). As more readers demand the genre, more libraries will be obliged to respond in order to ensure patron satisfaction. It will be
up to individual libraries whether or not they want to create specific sections or cataloging guidelines in response.

**The Art of Browsing**

Graphic novels have moved from a cult-like fanaticism into a popular and well circulated collection. Incorporating this genre has a positive impact on library circulation overall. Studies have shown that “patrons who check out graphic novels will come back, not only to read more graphic novels, but to read other books as well” (Pyles, 2012, p. 33). Given the plethora of titles available, collection development librarians have to be especially mindful of their choices. With cost as a barrier for many libraries, it is important for them to “provide this user group of graphic novel readers with what they are looking for” (Pyle, 2012, p. 33). Developing a collection of graphic novels goes beyond purchasing materials. Libraries must make it easier for readers of this genre to find and access their materials (Pyles, 2012, p.34). To make this collection more suitable for browsing, libraries should look to comic book stores for inspiration. Libraries should have a separate area for graphic novels. They can also consider cataloging graphic novels by character or publisher, making them easier to find.

**Embracing Change**

In emerging genres, it is important that libraries embrace the inevitable change that they will bring to their collection development policies. Awareness and self-education will be critical for librarians as they reevaluate their policies to include these genres. The most important thing for collection development librarians is to keep their patrons and their mission in mind as they move forward to meet these challenges.
References


