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Arthur J Boston, Murray State University

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A.J. Boston

Three milestone events led me to think very closely about three individual library collections. Within five years, my dad passed, my son was born, and I was hired in my first professional university library position. My father's passing forced my family to consider what to do with the stamp collection he amassed over fifty years. A few years later, the coin flipped, and my entry into fatherhood inspired me to question the content of my personal book and movie collection. These two deeply personal auras of thought were lent a professional perspective just as my university library began its first ever systematic weeding.

This column serves as a sort of debriefing of the borderline traumatic confluence of these parallel events. Here I describe the brief histories behind these three collections and how their deselection came to be.

The university where I work began in the year 1923 as a normal school in the middle of farmland. Its library began in this same year on the stage of the local high school with the donation of a dictionary and a Bible. The university and its library still stand among farmland today, but now as a fully-accredited multidisciplinary college with several advanced degree programs. What had not changed in this time was the collection of the library, which had never been systematically weeded. This collection was, in farmer parlance, going to seed.

Our library had made many modern moves, like a print to digital serials migration and a subsequent creation of new student study and collaboration space. Otherwise it was plain to
see if we were to grow, it was time to weed. Readers of this newsletter are likely somewhat versed with the basic rudiments of a library-wide deselection project. Our subject librarians made use of a fancy data software to scour our, hrm, mature collection, asking themselves the boilerplate questions like, is this information out of date, does it support current curriculum, has this ever been used?

Our weeding process walked a well-trod path, but the actual practice was still new to me: the interim liaison to the College of Business, hired the month prior. The collection was recognizable since I had completed my undergrad at this school. But as a Philosophy and English major, I’d rarely charted in this neighborhood of call ranges. While I was busy learning what resources business students and faculty might conceivably use, I was now simultaneously making educated guesses about what I prayed they wouldn’t miss.

The most daunting aspect was that I (read: liieee) would be partially responsible for the first true substantial cull of a nearly-century old collection. A collection representing thousands of choices. Choices made with the backing of cumulative years of experience multiple times greater than my full age. In a call range which had been a concern to me for less than a month.

Some pressure was alleviated by the fact that students and faculty in these departments weren’t looking as closely at this print collection as they once had. And I had another reason to feel some confidence in this undertaking. Just a couple years prior, I was tasked to dispatch with another well-considered, well-loved collection. One I had seemingly no business touching.
My father became confined to a wheelchair in first or second grade after being “struck down,” in his good natured account, with the polio virus. From this, one of his more memorable traits was born: stamp collecting. Philately had been recently popularized by a fellow American similarly struck down by polio, President Franklin Roosevelt. My father’s Aunt Adele gifted my father his first starter album the year he was confined to a hospital bed in Warm Springs, Georgia. Aunt Adele and FDR set in motion something which culminated in my childhood home resembling something like a special collections museum.

Although all of us in the immediate family enjoyed suggesting our patriarch was an insatiable hoarder, he was in fact quite selective. He collected stamps from every country with a postal system, boasting many complete sets. His other collecting emphasized Civil War and Depression-era Kentucky. I distinctly recall him showing me a letter from a Civil War soldier to President Lincoln, all in flowery handwriting and an alien sense of grammar. He often highlighted pieces of ephemera like this in his failed bid to shepherd me into the (dusty) fold.

On a wall in the kitchen is a shadow box frame displaying a humorously large blue ribbon. My dad very proudly took home the “big” prize at the State Fair in the Kentucky-related memorabilia section on more than one occasion. At his funeral in 2010, I was handed a book chronicling the history of a historical road in Louisville from its author with a note bookmarked on the acknowledgements page. In a classy move, an antiques dealer slipped me his business card as he wished me his condolences. All this to say my dad was not a junk collector.

A couple years after my father’s passing, my mother, sister, and I decided it would be okay to have a professional dealer (known and respected by my dad) take near the entire collection for
auction. This felt weird. Visiting home and walking past the ‘stamp room’ had been a comfort. All those green, red, and blue buckram album spines with gold-lettered names of continents staring back at me as they had my entire life, as they had stared at my father for decades. Without my father in the room, however, the contents of those albums were not being appreciated. At least not far outside a sense of nostalgia for the collector. My father had conscientiously made it clear throughout his life that his collection should be appreciated, really appreciated. He wasn’t a hoarder, and essentially, that was implicit in the message.

For my personal home library, my wife bought me a set of bookcases in 2011. These covered every wall of my office that wasn’t a door or window. These cases held 27 shelves, every inch filled with books, movies, and records. Even more stuff managed to spill out into the living room, random boxes, and in my mom’s garage two hundred miles away. Call this kind of seeming excess the product of a childhood spent indoors (in a house with a designated stamp room); of working in movie theatres and video rental and sales stores during the formative ages of 16 to 21.

At the end of 2014, a year after my son’s birth, something in me flipped. My attitude toward collecting went from completist to essentialist. As I type this in 2016, the living room, my mom’s garage, and near half the 27 shelves in my home office are now empty.

Quick digression. The professor who taught my Herman Melville undergrad course was not surprisingly also a Cormac McCarthy guy. (Let’s call him “Beff Bosborne” in order that he not be linked with a quote at the end of this paragraph.) I once asked Beff if he’d read Philip Roth’s American Pastoral, which he had not. Beff was so well-read, I was shocked. I cited a well-known
critic whom somewhere was quoted to have grouped together Roth along with McCarthy in a select small class of American writers. Professor Bosborne elegantly replied *fuck Harold Bloom!*

Beff elaborated at a later date, expressing his philosophy that a good reader should have just four or five writers they read. Like, *really* read. At that time, there was so much I had not read, and all that I *had* read had seemed so *typical* of a reader my age. So I was eager to read everything. How could I read only four or five writers? This notion messed with my head for almost a decade.

But alas! Were my critical sensibilities finally entering a *Beff Bosbornian ideal*? Afterall, my fiction shelf is down to three shelves, with works by a few authors (Roberto Bolaño, Cormac McCarthy [yes], and Vladimir Nabokov) now standing out for their prevalence. Movies are down to less than two bookcases, which is huge if you know me. Half are Criterion Collection editions and the other half are largely sorted by director. Have I always fiddled and tweaked and thought geekily about the guiding principles of my collection? Yes. But this was different. I just dumped almost half of it.

Around this time, a few other things helped bolster my position to discard; to view deselection as creative selection. I was very taken with Kanye West’s paraphrasing of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *Rolling Stone*: “a design is the point where you can't take anything else away.” And I joyfully held the Kool-Aid cup served with Marie Kondo’s *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Speaking of cults, a new world of bills inspired a reluctant Google search for Dave Ramsey, the money guru who champions debt simplicity. By selling and trading-in the
apparently inessential portion of my collection, I was financing new purchases relatively guilt-free.

But what really inspired this farewell to armfuls of paper and plastic was a little boy. Although this was a collection essentially built just for me, there was a new and impressionable person in the house, who spent time in my office with me, observing the objects his father had grown to appreciate. Keeping a copy of every book I ever read was not achieving this picture. If ever a complete reading history is sought, I have a Goodreads account.

For other reasons, aside from any literary merit I might deem, a lot of this stuff (*From Hell, The Walking Dead*) just had to go for parenting purposes. Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* made excellent cases for books in printed format, but not exactly for why I need to keep them. As hip as Clarice Lispector’s *Near to the Wild Heart* looked in my collection, I didn’t get into it. Instead, someone may find it at the local used bookstore now and love it, just as when I scored J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*.

Cutting away the fat, so to speak, reveals a more robust set of priorities, not only of taste, but of practical living. Just as a university library’s transformation of untouched manuscripts into collaboration student space displays a shift of values. On what I choose to devote my time, space, and money is a precise showing of where thought and action meet. The bulk of what I have is not rare or unique, not like what my father had managed to archive. Therefore I cannot excuse myself from active deselection, at least commensurate with the rate of my consumption. As much as my son appreciates his toys, he easily parts with them as he outgrows them. If my dad, my son, or my work can teach me anything, it’s that part of growing is letting things go.