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JOE CLARK

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Re: Strange claims that titles are “outside the scope” of TPL’s collections

To the TPL Board:

I am the single largest submitter of blue title-suggestion forms. I submitted 57 forms just in September. 215 titles have been added to TPL’s collections at my suggestion. About 50 suggestions were rejected, typically because they weren’t commercially orderable. But no means maybe, so in some of those cases I find a commercial vendor and resubmit. My routing around Collections Development’s rejections, policies, and attitudes has come at a cost. CDD turned the screws on the Pape District manager who then turned the screws on my hapless friends at Jones branch, who were then obliged to tell me CDD believed I was trying to influence the collections policy of the Toronto Public Library. Nope: I’m just plugging holes. Besides, one department simply cannot be aware of every item that would be viable for TPL’s collections. I see blue forms as a many-hands-make-short-work system. Nonetheless, I am still viewed as an irritant within the department (and basically everywhere within TPL management). I expect this will not change even should I be appointed to the next term of the Board and elected vice-chair.

I had previously complained to the Board about the unpublished and randomly implemented rules for collecting TV series on DVD. Since that complaint, which your Board simply “received” hence ignored, CDD has lost its collective mind altogether and is actually spending taxpayer money buying DVDs of series like *Friends* (116 pieces) and *The Office* (99) that are on free TV nearly every day. That makes a mockery of cost and scarcity and defies the unpublished collection criteria. Meanwhile, CDD continues to buy every bit of British television no matter how obscure (what is *Falling*, exactly?) and a range of U.S. network-TV shows of dubious merit (*The Shield* [90 pieces]).

Not content to add and reject TV shows on DVD for unpublished criteria, now CDD is rejecting perfectly plausible blue-form suggestions with the excuse that the title is outside the scope of TPL’s collections.

1. *Minorités*: This book, a collection of postings on the French *Minorités* blog about the intersection of racial minorities and the gay and lesbian community, was deemed outside the scope of TPL’s French collection. I checked the relevant subject headings and found about 15 items in those subject headings in French, so obviously the scope argument is false. Three unrelated and obscure French suggestions of mine were separately added no problem.

2. *Manuals 1*: This graphic-design monograph was rejected at first because of cost. So I did what CDD could have done and contacted the publisher to ask for a discount. ("We'll try to work something out" was, in effect, the response.) Upon resubmission, whaddya know, a library whose stacks are full of graphic-design books, most of which I have personally read, now deems this book outside the scope of TPL's collections. ("Scope" here is revenge for resubmitting.)
3. Four books by Jack Donovan that advance a pro-masculinity philosophy were also deemed outside scope. The library is replete with books advancing anti-masculinity philosophies (I've read them). I thought the library had a commitment to freedom of conscience. I further thought that the natural home of materials with competing views on allegedly controversial points was the library. Nope: Presenting men, manhood, and masculinity as honourable and valuable is out of scope for the library system in the biggest city in Canada.

Nowhere is the alleged "scope" outside which these titles fall actually published for all to see. So let's talk about the reasons to reject suggested titles. The back of the blue form, which desperately needs to be redesigned by someone who can actually design a form as opposed to a secretary banging something out in Microsoft Word, lists the following exhaustive grounds for rejection:

1. Poorly reviewed/no reviews [TPL buys hundreds of stinkers a year, most showing up via ARP; this criterion is a farce]
2. Subject already well covered in the collection
3. Newer titles available on the subject [misused with books on technologies that have not been changed or updated – ask me about my half-year-long battle to add a single book on Unicode]
4. TV series does not meet selection criteria [unpublished and not actually heeded]
5. No verification
6. Unsuitable format [despite TPL's spending tens of thousands of dollars renovating its special-collections room and despite the presence of the Merril Collection]
7. Out of print/not available [this means "We plugged it into Amazon.ca and got nothing"; I routinely find a supplier and resubmit. Anyway, I never ever submit a title without looking up distribution, a burden only I have]
8. Cost [except that the library can, does, and should buy a few \$100 or \$200 books if deemed valuable]

What's not on this list? "Scope." What does scope mean? I have two theories. The first is "Anything I submit." The second is a bigger one, and let's talk about it.

Taste

Staff at Collections Development are presumably all MLSs, and presumably further are mostly middle-aged women. These are intelligent people who recognize many of their own limitations. The canonical example is popular music, because basically anybody over the age of 30 has no real idea what's new and interesting. One can consult the Billboard chart or equivalent, but that is no substitute for lived experience. (I've helped out CDD with formats they could not possibly understand, like heavy metal and dance, to no effect.)

I expect librarians to have taste and to exercise it. You're an MLS: Taste is part of your job! I spent years trying to explain this to TRL Browcery managers in the context of cube displays. (Response from one manager who was later promoted: "Can we wrap this up soon? I've got a meeting at 10:30.") Those high-profile display cases should carry only what's new, interesting, and/or unique. Making them look not-empty is not actually the job here. North York Central's Browcery is phenomenally well curated; TRL's is a warehouse for whatever didn't fit on the other shelves. Throughout, my point has been that, yes, I expect you to impose your learned taste on what you display. I know you have taste and I want you to use it. That's what we're paying you for.

For titles suggested by library patrons, I submit that taste is actually a criterion in use behind the scenes. I want TPL to stop acting hypocritically in this regard. I know, expect, and want you to be using taste as a criterion in selection. So let's be honest with our list of reasons for rejection. Update the form (I already explained it's an unusable mess) to include the following simple criterion for rejection: "Taste."

Now, this cannot metastasize to come to mean "Anything Joe Clark submits." It can't become a vendetta. And no *really* means maybe when taste is cited as a reason to reject an item; you can expect resubmissions there.

But I don't appreciate being misled. The items listed above that were deemed out of scope were never out of scope. Similar items already exist in the library and the purported scope has not been published. They were turned down because I suggested them (in one case, teeing off CDD staff who didn't bother asking for a discount) and because they aren't (female) librarians' cup of tea.

I can deal with that if and when it's honestly and rationally presented to me. It hasn't been.