

2014.05.09

Re: Collections “policy” on TV shows on DVD

To the TPL Board:

TPL’s Collections Development Department has no apparent written selection criteria for TV shows on DVD. CDD buys basically every weird and marginal British series, seemingly *because* it’s British, yet turns down essentially every blue-form-suggested title as a matter of course. (CDD misleads users of blue forms.) TPL buys new and “classic” books, musical recordings, films, and other materials, but refuses to apply similar logic in the case of TV shows.

Let’s start with first principles. I cannot imagine a scenario in which I would argue that TPL should *not* carry a title. Hence I am not arguing that TPL should not have bought the marginal and obscure TV series that overrun branches’ shelves. Nor am I suggesting that “I’ve never heard of it” counts as any kind of selection criterion no matter who might utter that phrase. (By definition every library user has never heard of all but a few hundred items in TPL’s collection.) And I’m not talking about anime or non-English series.

I am complaining instead about the following combination of factors.

1. The blue title-suggestion form claims (on recto) that “TV series are purchased selectively due to the volume of requests and cost for each set/season” and (on verso, as reason for rejection) “TV Series [*sic*] does not meet selection criteria.” But *there are no selection criteria* – not on the Web site or anywhere else. When directly challenged to cough up those selection criteria, CDD head Susan Caron didn’t. In part she’s tired of dealing with me (she is – ask her), but TPL *has no published selection criteria* for TV shows on DVD.
2. Items that anyone with half a clue would immediately agree are going to be popular should be bought as a matter of course. But that isn’t how CDD selects TV shows.
3. TV series, it seems, also arrive via ARP, loading up the library with stinkers (as ARP tends to do – cf. mass-market paperbacks). Some works really are so crappy we should not waste money on them. ARP may be the actual source of those endless marginal British TV series, but I infer that TPL appears to buy everything British just because Canadians are assumed to have British roots and everything British is classy by default. It is American shows – and, ironically, Canadian shows – that are “purchased selectively,” by inference because they are tacky and have to be justified *a priori*.
4. CDD may or may not choose TV series after answering the following question: “Can people watch reruns of this show any day of the week on free TV, including basic cable?” I support that criterion, which would imply that *The Simpsons* and *The Big Bang Theory* should not be collected by TPL. But, whaddya know, TPL bought *Friends*.

5. CDD is inconsistent in dealing with main shows and spinoffs. TPL bought *Doctor Who* (and should have), but also bought its offshoot *Torchwood* (and should have). The library eventually bought *Battlestar Galactica* but explicitly turned down its spinoff, *Caprica*.
6. TPL refuses to buy even minimal, well-curated lists of foundational TV series, except when it decides that the library suddenly needs copies of *All in the Family*. Here are some titles the library has refused to buy: *Space: 1999*; *Thirtysomething*; *Family*; *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. But every branch has copies of third-tier BBC and ITV programs you've never heard of nor would ever care to watch. (The fact that I keep seeing them in branches means nobody else wants them either.)
7. Pay-TV programs (HBO shows, essentially) should of course be purchased, but TPL also buys obscure American TV shows, which almost but not quite undercuts my hypothesis about its bias toward British shows.
8. The cost issue is not worth taking seriously even for a second.
9. CL has many donated TV series that TPL should have bought up front, including *MST3K*.
10. CDD has no procedure to replace so-scratched-up-they're-unplayable copies of DVD sets that circulate constantly and are guaranteed to keep doing so (e.g., *The X-Files*).
11. TPL says no by default to every single blue-form title suggestion, except when it reverses itself later. I've already established that the selection process is a mess, but what makes it a laughingstock is the case of *Friday Night Lights*. This critically acclaimed, not-very-popular series, which had to be rescued from cancellation a couple of times, is essentially impossible to watch on TV. I put in a blue form for it last year, which was automatically rejected. Now TPL suddenly has 69 copies of all five seasons.

I repeat: The TV show dismissed as not meeting "selection criteria" was later bought in totum.

To put it bluntly, CDD has atrocious taste in TV shows, can be relied upon to buy obscure, irrelevant programming, and arbitrarily (perhaps spitefully) turns down essentially every customer request. The one and only blue-form suggestion of mine that TPL actually bought was *Orphan Black*. The idea that anyone would have to actually ask the library to acquire this show is proof of CDD's failure.

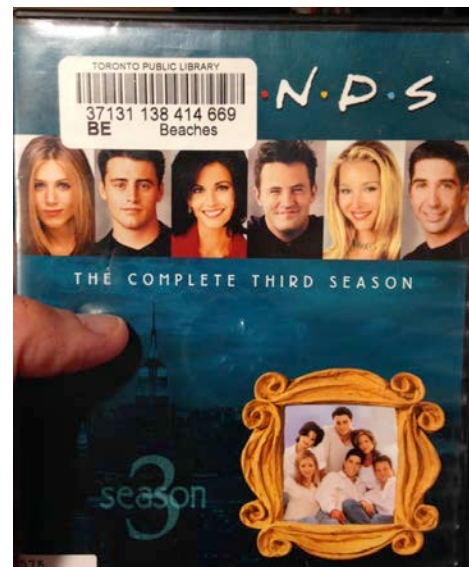
Take a look at the attached photographs and tell me how many of those series you would choose if you had an MLS and an ostensibly limited budget to spend.

I want this Board to divert its attention for five minutes from devising new and ever-more-intrusive ways of selling out the library to actually overseeing the *policy* underpinning its collection. If you people actually used the library and *oversaw policy* on something other than corporate sponsorship or advertising, you would have known about all this already.

And incidentally, does it surprise you that it is again I who shows up with the most knowledge about and the most documentation of TPL policy? It shouldn't. See you on the Board next term.



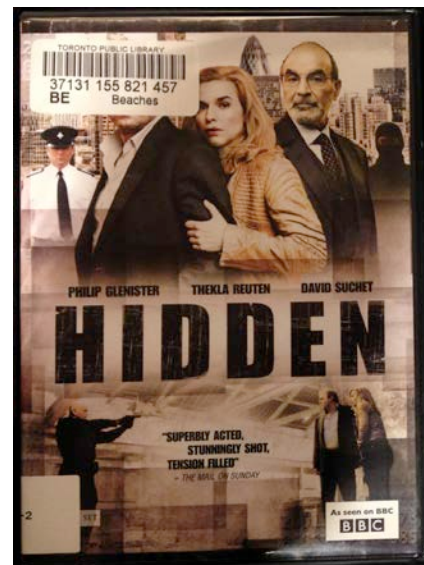
Buying 'All in the Family' displaces another classic show



Buying 'Friends' displaces buying a valuable show



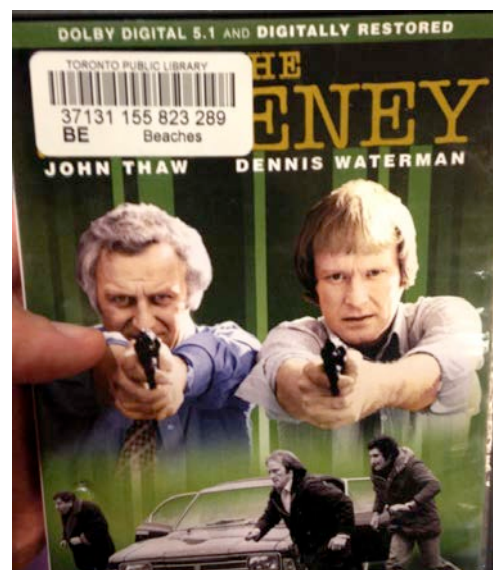
Buying 'The Closer' displaces buying a valuable show



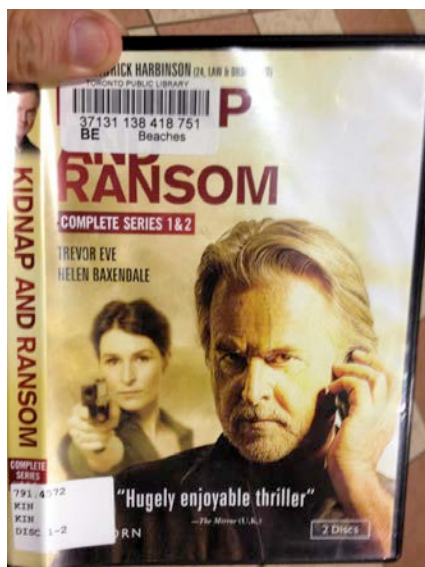
Obscure and British 1



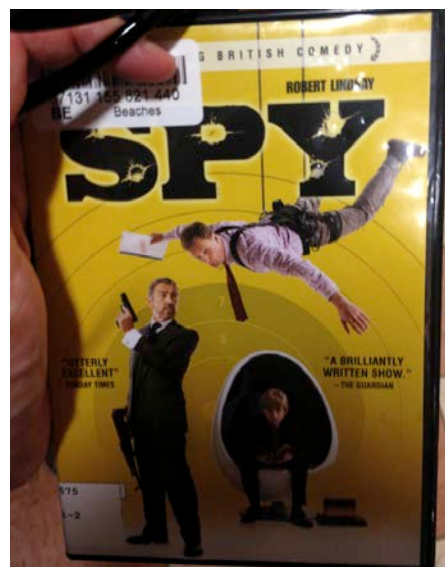
Obscure and British 2



Obscure and British 3



Obscure and British 4



Obscure and British 5



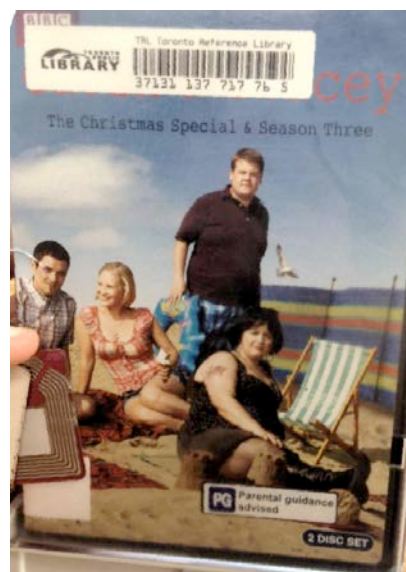
Obscure and British 6



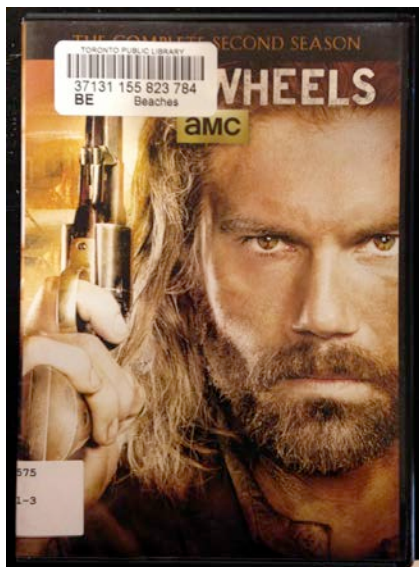
Obscure and British 7



Obscure and British 8



Obscure and British 9



Obscure but American 1



Obscure but American 2



Obscure but American 3



Obscure but American 4