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Book Reviews: Monographic Musings

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I recently requested a review copy of this book to give to our Head of Circulation because we’ve been working together lately on a long-term weeding project and I know that shelving is the bane of her existence these days. We have a number of very overcrowded areas in our general stacks that are in desperate need of “distilling” as I like to say.

Will this book be of any use to her? — Most assuredly. It’s a compact, no-nonsense volume with plenty of good advice. Its weakness for our (academic library) purpose is that it is decidedly geared toward the public library environment. However, that does not stop it from being useful in any library setting if you can substitute your classification system (LC or something else) when you hit the references to Dewey, and mentally interchange “student assistant” (or whoever makes up your temporary workforce) when the author refers to “library pages.”

As the title indicates, this book is focused on the management aspects of supervising those individuals who shelve books in libraries. Because this population tends to be made up of individuals who are usually working part-time hours for modest wages, with high turn-over rates, the challenges of supervising and training are considerable. However, the author does an excellent job of addressing all aspects of the process — from advertising for help through disciplinary issues and firing with dignity. The strongest takeaways are in the training sections, which is information I was hoping to find. I also find Tunstall’s method for moving large sections of materials to be a sound and logical process. Having experienced a complete building move with professional movers, I understand her sentiments concerning the effectiveness of such services. The author offers a “do-it-yourself” system that can work and may save your library thousands of dollars both in labor and clean up costs.

There are a couple of topics that I do not find in this book for which I expected to see at least some mention. One is the proper handling of books and materials while shelving. There is essentially no coverage of this aspect at all. Emphasis is solely on the ability of shelvers to place books in correct order. Granted, there are plenty of good guides showing techniques for proper handling while shelving, so it’s not that there is any lack of information available, but I would have assumed it would have been at least mentioned along the way. Another discussion I would have liked to have seen included is how shelvers can assist library staff who are involved in weeding projects. The author notes that shelves should not be allowed to get overfull, but then does not follow through with how that might be avoided (i.e., weeding). Related to that, there is not much coverage of the topic of short-term shifting which is commonly required, especially in libraries where space is at a premium and the weeding can’t be done regularly for whatever reason.

Aside from these minor shortcomings, I find the book readable, practical, and laced with a sense of humor. The examples of skills tests for candidate screening are excellent and can be easily adapted by any type of library. There is an index and an appendix with examples of personnel forms and other useful materials. There is also an accompanying web site for the book embedded within the ALA Editions Website, although this author is not (yet) utilizing it. (All it says at this writing is “Coming soon …”)

While many of the resources libraries provide these days for their readers are electronic, as long as we have physical materials on shelves, we will need to take care of those shelves the old-fashioned way. This book is therefore a welcome addition to the Circulation Supervisor’s reference shelf.