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590: Local Notes -- Collection Development and Bellesiles' "Arming America": The Case for Getting Rid of a Celebrated Book

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590: Local Notes — Collection Development and Bellesiles' "Arming of America"

The Case for Getting Rid of a Celebrated Book.

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Are there occasions when a well-written, recently-published and scholarly book should be removed from a library collection? Are there times when you should take a title, maybe one which has won a prestigious national award, yank it off the stacks and toss it in the recycling bin? As a librarian, would you even consider such an action?

The conventional answer is no. No one should ever discard an already-purchased, award winning title. Pulling it off the shelf would be folly. What is more, doing so would make one guilty of censorship — what most librarians regard as the profession's single most reprehensible professional crime.

Well, if that conventional answer is your considered opinion — if that is your final answer — I believe you are wrong, and wrong on all counts. There are indeed times — rare though they may be — when taking a book off the shelves and removing it from the collection may be exactly what you should do as a librarian, if you care anything about the integrity of your collection and your responsibilities as a professional. Such an action in such an instance would also, by the way — (let me be clear about this) have nothing whatsoever to do with censorship. On the contrary, it would have everything to do with maintaining a solid collection — notwithstanding what our good friends at the **ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom** might say to the contrary.

Consider one such example, the fascinating case of **Professor Bellesiles** and his celebrated book, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*. **Professor Bellesiles** was a tenured and distinguished **Emory** associate professor of history, a bright star in the constellation of up-and-coming colonial American historians. His book won the **Bancroft Prize** in 2001, one of the profession's most prestigious awards. In his *Arming America*, **Bellesiles** argued with impressive erudition and winsome prose that few Americans owned or valued firearms in early America and that the framers fashioned the second amendment to defend the collective rights of states and not those of individual Americans. He speculated that the Civil War changed all of that. The **Colt** company and dime-store novels popularized guns and captured the American imagination, helping to create what **Bellesiles** called "a national gun culture." **Bellesiles'** research was massive (or so it seemed). He drew from a wide array of sources: 18th and 19th century probate records, primary accounts of 18th century battles and personal memoirs. The author's chapter notes alone ran more than one hundred and twenty pages.

His analysis took the scholarly community by storm. Reviewers were effusive in their praise, and the **Emory** professor became something of an overnight-academic celebrity. A *New York Times* review gushed that "**Bellesiles'** work had "dispersed the darkness that covered the gun's early history in *America*." The *Christian Science Monitor* labeled his analysis as "most convincing."¹

The author's popularity, however, was short-lived. Following the book's initial acclaim, questions began to emerge. Certain aspects of the analysis didn't seem to add up. **Bellesiles** was found to have misquoted his sources, and some of his statistics failed to square with the work of other scholars in the field. Indeed, in less than a year, a chorus of critics argued that *Arming of America* lacked basic integrity. It wasn't that **Bellesiles** had overstated his case or stretched his arguments. It was far worse than that. He had misrepresented evidence. He had fabricated data. His critics pointed out that he tabulated guns, for instance, in San Francisco inventories that he could never have seen, since all such records had been destroyed by fire in 1906. He logged a huge error rating (more than 60 percent) in the probate records that he allegedly examined, and he grossly misrepresented homicide cases in colonial cities.

In October 2002, an investigative committee of distinguished scholars at **Emory University** concluded that **Professor Bellesiles**, a tenured professor for nearly fourteen years, was guilty of falsification and that his book was "unprofessional and misleading." **Professor Bellesiles** resigned from his position at **Emory** immediately after the committee's conclusions became public. Two months later, **Columbia University** officially announced that it had decided to withdraw the **Bancroft Award** — an action, it should be noted, that the University has never taken in its fifty-six year history of granting the award.

In light of its infamous record, one might conclude that **Professor Bellesiles'** book might be a rare find in American academic and public libraries. After all, scholars had loudly discredited the work as unscholarly and terribly misleading. Its award-winning status had been revoked. Its publisher had removed the title from its list of sale items, and its author had been resigned to academic exile. But this is far from the case. In fact, *Arming of America* continues to enjoy an amazing place of honor in America's academic and public libraries. A simple search on **WorldCat** reveals that over

2,274 libraries continue to hold the title. That is more than countless best-sellers and major academic titles.

Of course, librarians will counter that they are not in the business of policing their stacks. They cling tenaciously to their own form of *caveat emptor*. Let the buyer beware, or in this case, let the patron judge. Some library catalogs, they would also contend, often include helpful reviews, and in the case of *Arming of America*, some catalogs have offered links to **James Lindgren's** brilliant article in the *Yale University Law Journal* entitled,

"Fall from Grace, Arming America and the **Bellesiles Scandal**."² A nearby library here in North Carolina even took the unorthodox but possibly effective technique of taping a popular review to the inside cover of the book.

None of this, however, will keep a host of unwary readers from finding in the stacks a terribly misleading book that bases its arguments on fabricated data and deliberately misconstrued research. Vast numbers of libraries all across the nation hold this title as a regular part of their collections. Now, I am not about to suggest that as librarians we should buy and retain only those books whose research is careful or whose analysis is thorough-going and scholarly. On the contrary, we ought to collect all sorts of titles at all sorts of levels and with all sorts of points of view. Nevertheless, when a book has been proven to contain fabricated data and misrepresented research, when the scholarly community has collectively rejected its claims to any standards of legitimate scholarship, and when an award-granting agency has taken the unprecedented action of withdrawing an award, we should take note. We should summarily jettison such a title from our collections. We should throw it out. Our commitment to scholarly standards, the integrity of our collections, and the well-being of our patrons demands nothing less. 🍀



Endnotes

1. **Wills, Garry**, Editorial "Spiking the Gun Myth," *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2000, Section 7, at 5, and **DeGroot, Gerard J.**, "Up in arms for 225 years." *Christian Science Monitor*, 9/7/2000, Vol. 92, Issue 201.
2. **Lindgren, James**, "Fall from Grace: Arming America and the Bellesiles Scandal," *Yale Law Journal*, June 2002, Vol. 111 Issue 8, pp. 2195-2249.