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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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A re there occasions when a well-written, recently-published and scholarly book was found to have been 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, make one guilty of 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 of the book, and his book 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.” 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 probe 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 University 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 concluded that 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 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