Who “Keeps” the Books?

By Alison Thor
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On any given day, a patron or staff member will not have far to go to spy a burgundy-vested student employee among the rows of book shelves on each of the four floors of Waldo Library. Day after day, a cohort of student assistants reshelves several hundred, sometimes thousands, of the three million books found in the General Stacks. These special assistants are the true “keepers” of the collection. Moreover, they are responsible for implementing preservation procedures, shifting materials, measuring shelf space, moving furniture, and constructing new shelves. These men and women also monitor, that is, read the shelves of the entire General Stacks collection to verify the correct placement of all classified materials. The Stacks Department consists of one full time staff member and between 12 to 20 part-time student employees and volunteers. These, then, are the personnel who are the key to finding “the book that you want, where you expect it to be, when you want to find it.”

Each volume in Waldo Library has its own unique call number that dictates its correct placement in the vast order of books on the shelves. The major responsibility of the Stacks Department staff is to make sure each volume in the General Stacks is placed in its exact call number sequence—no simple task when using the Library of Congress classification scheme that often has an alphanumeric sequence of 9 to 20 letters and digits. Waldo Library also has two additional call number systems: Dewey Decimal (DDC) for the Children’s Literature Collection, and SuDocs for our U.S. government publications. The departments of Central Reference, Government Documents, Maps, Reserves, Science Reference, Special Collections, and the four branch libraries maintain their own collections.

Although the primary work of the Stacks staff is to reshelve volumes that have been removed from the shelves by library patrons or the Resource Sharing office, they also reshelve new books and assist in moving sections of books from one location to another. There may be 3 to 10 student employees working throughout the day depending on their work schedules. A typical day would have the students complete three pick-ups on each of the four floors of Waldo: morning, mid-afternoon, and evening. A pick-up involves walking through all public areas of the library, “picking up” books that are left on tables and in book-drop bins. Two or three times a week, the pick-up extends literally to every aisle between all the stacks, as well as study areas. The aisle pick-up books often are reshelved immediately since they are found near their permanent location. On average, the department picks up 250 books within the library per day. We refer to this count statistic as “in-house use.”

Books that are not shelved immediately during a pick-up are arranged by the LC call number on the “Sorting Shelves” that are located on each floor in the immediate vicinity of their associated General Stacks and are patron-accessible. Sorting Shelves are a temporary location, where books are rough-sorted by the first letters of their call number. Experience has shown that the rough sorting is a more efficient method since it moves the material quickly to a “findable/accessible” location.

Once Stack personnel finish their assigned pick-up from the stacks and reading areas, they begin to reshelve the Sorting Shelves materials in the General Stacks. Referring to a sorting shelf “status” form, each student employee chooses the area where he/she will reshelve books. Items are pulled from the Sorting Shelves, sorted by call numbers and placed on a book truck, counted, and then shelved.

From left to right: Back row: Diep Dao, Kashif Javed, Meenachi Raja Manickam, Nora Dung Dao, Nicole Novak. Front row: Yolonda Lavender, Alice Kropewnicki, Alexis Guzman, Supervisor Alison Thor, Ishrat Farooqui.

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in their proper order. Some student employees become extremely efficient at shelving books. The high average is 100 books per hour. This must be done, needless to say, with a high degree of accuracy since a mis shelved book becomes a lost book in a large stack area!

The department strives for a 24-hour turn-around time from the time the book is placed on a sorting shelf until the time it is shelved in the General Stacks. This is routinely accomplished except during semester midterms and during the last week or two of the semester when thousands of items are returned to the library.

In fiscal year 2002-2003, the Stacks Department shelved 318,822 books. The peak month was November, with 41,852 books shelved. The annual shelving count averages 26,568 books per month, and 932 books per day (based on the library being open 342 days out of 365 for that fiscal year). Of the 318,822 books shelved, 131,227 were from “in-house” use. The remainder were books that were returned by patrons and checked back in by Circulation, were used through the Resource Sharing Center for interlibrary loan, or were newly purchased. Carts of books come through the Stacks Department several times a day. New books for the General Stacks, processed by Technical Services, are brought to the Stacks Department for shelving in the General Stacks. WMU loans materials to other libraries and once that material is returned, the Stacks employees re-shelve those materials in the General Stacks.

A by-product of having open stacks so the patrons can physically browse the collections is that some patrons, after looking at a title, place the volume back on the shelf in the wrong location. The Stacks Department, as a result, must constantly “shelf-read.” Shelf reading is checking every single book on a given shelf to make sure it is in correct call number order. Shelf reading is time-consuming, tedious, and demands concentration since the classification systems in Waldo produce lengthy numbers and every item, even pamphlets in boxes, must be checked for accurate placement. If a book is out of order, it is pulled and placed where it belongs. The department manages to shelf-read the entire General Stacks collection, millions of items, as time permits, once each year.

Even though Waldo Library underwent a major reconstruction with added shelf space in the early 1990s, the collection has grown extensively or reorganized significantly as when the Physical Sciences branch collection was incorporated into Waldo in 1994. As a result, the Stacks Department is heavily involved in “shifting” whole shelves of books from one location to another. A classification or call number system requires that, as similar topic books are added, space must be found for them. Stack personnel shifts materials both backward and forward to make room so that the additions remain in correct call number order. Shifting may involve only a few shelves, or it may involve an entire section of the library. Large shifts (e.g., 9,264 shelves for the entire H through JZ collection were shifted in 2001) can take several weeks to complete. In the last ten years, ALL of the General Stacks have been shifted except for a small section on third floor.

As must be obvious by now, the work of the individuals who are “stacks assistants” is physically challenging, requires a high degree of concentration and attention to detail, and is absolutely essential to the effectiveness of the Libraries’ services. Besides the responsibilities already noted, these dedicated students and staff

- design and complete special preservation studies such as the assessment of shelf adjustment to accommodate “taller” books so that they are not damaged when reshelved or moved;
- measure the collection, i.e., literally measure the linear feet of materials within each classification, to use as predictors for space needs and growth patterns;
- transport, set up, and take down seven-foot shelf frames, bases, base-ends, shelves, and shelf-ends that are held together with nuts and bolts, and secured at the top with “tie-down struts”;
- pull books that need repair or new labels, deliver them to the Binding or Processing departments, and reshelve them once the damage is fixed;
- return books to all of the special departments, e.g., Central Reference, that are picked up in the General Stacks of the library;
- manage, along with Archives and Regional History Collections, the Remote Storage area on East Campus including the transport of the material to the storage facility on East Campus and, without an elevator, placing the books in call number order on six floors of the storage tower as well as in the compact shelving area;
- move furniture, e.g., chairs, study tables, etc. as offices or public areas are reorganized;
- plant and maintain the flowers on the 3rd floor roof garden in the summer months, and, finally,
- their mobility and familiarity with call numbers make them an excellent source for user information. When a patron comes to one of those workers in a burgundy vest, and says, “I can’t find this book,” “I’ve never been here before,” or “This library is BIG,” Stacks employees will do their best to assist them. They are there, above all, to “keep” the books in use.

The employees and volunteers of the Stacks Department are decision-makers as well as independent and detailed-oriented workers. No one tells them where to shelve books. They determine this on their own when they sign-in at a central communication and organization center on the lower level of Waldo. They check what needs to be done, formulate their task schedules, write down their plans and where they will be working, and manage their own time. Each one knows when and where it is appropriate to shelf-read. Each one knows when books need to be cleared out of Circulation. And, each one knows what to do with books that “appear” in the office. They keep watch over the library estate, and they simply do a marvelous job in accomplishing the work that needs to be done. “Who Keeps the Books?” They do!