New Ways of Keeping Down the Issues of Fiction.¹

I BELIEVE that the briefly expressed opinions of twenty practical librarians, evoked during a discussion, are worth exactly twenty times as much as the opinion of one librarian expressed at length in a paper. For this reason, I have for some time urged that at our annual meetings, more valuable results would be obtained, if members would present to the meeting brief notes on any practical question that has come under their consideration, not so much to press upon the meeting the importance of their own notions, as to serve for a text for the notions of others. With this view, and as a mere outsider, I venture to place before the meeting a thought on the subject of the issues of fiction. Pray understand at the outset, that here and now I am neither an advocate for, nor against, the reading of fiction. I have my own strong views on the subject, but they do not concern the question now before you. The preponderance of fiction issues, whether in itself, a good thing or a bad thing, is undoubtedly used, oftentimes with sad effect, as a strong argument against the adoption of the Acts, and while I should repudiate any suggestion to deprive the ratepayers of the right of choosing freely their own reading, I would urge that any reasonable means likely to result in the diminution of the excessive percentages, so freely quoted against us, by the newspapers, is worthy of our attention. As an outsider, the first thing that strikes me is that, *all Public Libraries do their best to encourage and promote the excessive issues of fiction*, while at the same time they profess to deplore the excess. That is to say, while they are perfectly content with one copy of Macaulay's *History of England*, when it comes to a sensational novel, they order copies by the dozen. When one lucky reader

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asks for, *and gets* Macaulay, the next twenty applicants, or more, have to go away unsatisfied, or probably take with them a novel to fill up the time, until they get the book they really desire to read. But not only the first applicant, but the second, and up to the twentieth or more, go away rejoicing in the possession of copies of the same sensation novel.

I would like to ask practical librarians whether it would not be worth trying, in a limited way, to reverse this order of things. I have not been able to make an exhaustive collation of catalogues and issues, but I fancy that the issues of fiction bear a very close relation to the number of volumes of fiction upon the shelves, as compared with other literature. Would it not be possible in some libraries, particularly the newer ones, to try the experiment of getting half-a-dozen copies of the more popular non-fictional works, and only one copy of each of the novels chosen by the committee? It seems to me certain that if this were done, the issues of fiction would go down rapidly, and moreover, in a perfectly legitimate way.

I would further suggest as an encouragement to the more serious readers (and surely in these dreary days of struggle for existence, they do deserve some encouragement) that each reader on application should receive *a second ticket*, which could be used *solely for non-fictional works*. I think you would then find that the average novel-reader, on applying for his favourite novel, and finding it out, would very often be tempted to avail himself of his second ticket, and take with him something that might perhaps, do him no more good than a good novel, but would tend to bring down the exaggerated percentages which are made such baleful use of by adverse newspapers, and would indirectly help forward the movement we all have at heart, that is, the extension of Public Libraries throughout the land.

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