

Field Notes from Library 4965

By K.L.A. Hyatt

A mother and her toddler were walking by my Little Free Library. The mom, pushing the stroller with an infant, slowed to look into the library, her little girl following behind. As the mother kept going, the little girl stopped in front of the library, too small to reach the library door by herself.

“I want a book,” she says. Her mother responds by calling her to catch up. The little girl, who was just over two, screamed “I want a book” and dissolved into tearful hysterics.

I thought to myself, “My work here is done.”

I come from a family of book lovers and my brother and I have expanded that love of reading to a love of collecting books as well. So when I first came across the idea of the Little Free Library, I knew I needed to add a library annex to the collections piling up inside my home. I wanted a little library in order to share my love of books with everyone. Not to mention that it would be nice to have a repository for already read titles.

Since I set my little library free in the neighborhood, I have been surprised by the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from my neighbors. From the day I put it up, I have been stopped by people I’ve never seen before to thank me for it. People often go out of their way to make a visit. There are even people who pull over while driving in order to take a peek.

But nothing has been as gratifying as the response from the kids in the neighborhood. For the first ten years that I lived here there was rarely a child to be seen, but in the last five years families have been having kids and families with kids have been moving in. The kids all love the Little Free Library. Nothing brings a smile to my face as the happy cry of a kid finding a book they want to read.

My library has become a place for neighborhood news: block party announcements, lost pets, that sort of thing. I’m careful to keep the taped-up announcements relevant, simple and up-to-date. No political announcements, no religious pamphlets. On the whole, I don’t censor the contents—except that time there were three copies of The Book of Mormon. I took two copies out.

Curating the stock is an almost daily past time for me. I’ve noticed that on Fridays and Saturdays the library’s contents become sparse and picked over, especially holiday weekends. I try to stock it up as much as possible when we head into a weekend.

The adult side, the left side, of the library pretty much takes care of itself. I will curate the selection now and then, removing books that have been there awhile or books that have gone and come back a few times, adding some titles to fill it in.

The kids’ section, the right side, is hard to keep stocked. The books tend to get taken and not returned, which is entirely alright with me. A kid is reading it and that is the important thing. I’m favored with several connections that provide advanced reading copies of kids’ and young adult books, so I can usually keep it fairly well stocked. I also buy cheaply at library book sales. These kids can be voracious.

I have a birds-eye view of patrons to my little library. It sits next the sidewalk facing my house. I chose that spot very carefully. I work from home and often work out of my living room which allows me to see people passing by. My street lies between several bus stops so there is a fair amount of foot traffic. The

street is also a favorite for dog walkers and evening strollers. We get all sorts going through here and I get to see so many people stop and look for books.

From my armchair, some of my favorite observations:

There are triplet boys whose nanny walks them to the library nearly every day. She arranges them on the bench and then reads them a story. They are getting big enough now that they reach inside to claim their own books.

A Goth teenager with bright red hair began coming around last summer, making a daily pilgrimage to check out the contents. During the school year, she doesn't come around so much, but I still see her visiting frequently.

The woman who speed walks around the neighborhood doing lap after lap. For years she walked by never slowing until one day the library caught her eye and she stopped to check out the selection. Frequently now, she is to be seen speed walking the sidewalks reading a book.

There is elderly gentleman who takes all the picture books he can get. They don't come back, but it seems that he has some small one that is a book lover. As long as they go to good homes, I don't really mind.

The families that pretend they can't open the door (either to begin with or after perusing) because their toddler is demanding more books. Surprisingly, this happens fairly frequently.

The neighbor who takes daily walks with his kids inspired me to put in a bench. He would often bring his kids down the block and pick a book to read. They would sit on the curb, read the book, then put it back. Now they have a place to sit.

The bench has become a stopping point for people, whether or not they are interested in the library. I've seen couples use it to take in a sunset. The elderly often use it as a rest stop. When the library is very full, people use it to go through some of their choices, taking the time to pick the book they want. There is an older woman who comes nearly every day to look at the books, then she sit on the bench and takes a phone call.

One day a police officer pulled up to the curb and went to look over the library contents. He then came into my yard and up to my front door. I was a little nervous as my city can be particular about what can be put up on sidewalks and in neighborhoods. Instead of getting a citation, the police officer asked me about the Little Free Library movement and how to find more information about it. He wanted to put up one too.

Books have always been a motivating force in my life and getting to share my love of them with my neighbors has been particularly empowering. But what I least expected was to be inspired by the books that people have left. When I put in the library, it didn't occur to me that there would be so much exchange. I've discovered several authors I wasn't familiar with before. I've read books by authors I always meant to get to. I've even discovered new favorite books.

My little library has become a big, fun part of my daily life and I'm always receiving little surprises. Such as a note left in the box this week, "I am in Pasadena every other Tuesday. I will bring a book and the one I took in 2 weeks. Thanks ☺"