

The Joy of Little Libraries

Small in scale, but big on fun, small street libraries are bringing families and communities together.

by Kelly S. Thompson

Perched at the end of my driveway is my “Thompson library”, a former newspaper vending machine turned provider of community literary entertainment.

Yes, I have joined the ranks of book lovers who are either building their own mini library and or just enjoying finding a volume to explore in one of these charming book boxes strewn throughout neighbourhoods.

Just last week, an entire family stopped their car to check out my Thompson library selections before tucking books under their arms, getting back in the car and heading out of town. It doesn't matter if those books come back; new ones will soon replace them, donated by me or somebody else. What matters is that families, individuals, and entire communities are embracing books like never before.

A family adventure

You have no doubt witnessed the emergence of mini libraries tucked at the end of driveways or property lines and brimming with reused books. They follow the “take a book, leave a book” model. There are no rules, no deadlines and no cost. They are close by, easy to access, and full of literary surprises for inquisitive visitors.

Adding to the appeal is that each book box is as unique as its owner. I've seen some made from birdhouses, large mailboxes, or abandoned wine crates, and each is personally decorated to match the family who puts it on display.

While the concept of book sharing isn't new, the book box trend burgeoned when Todd Bol of Wisconsin created a schoolhouse-themed little library to honour his deceased mother. Keen interest from locals had him build several others to donate to local organizations and soon Little Free Library was created, offering pre-made book box options and allowing registered users to place their library on an international map for others to find. Not all mini libraries are part of the Little Free Library organization; they may be built by groups or individuals that just want to spread the printed word.

Yvonne Tu Herman and her two sons, Riel, 11, and Jasper, 8, make routine stops at Rob Nicholson's Little Free Library in Markham checking for new stock. Yvonne enjoys watching her kids use books for entertainment instead of focusing on screen time. Searching for a new book in Rob's stash piques their curiosity and sense of adventure,

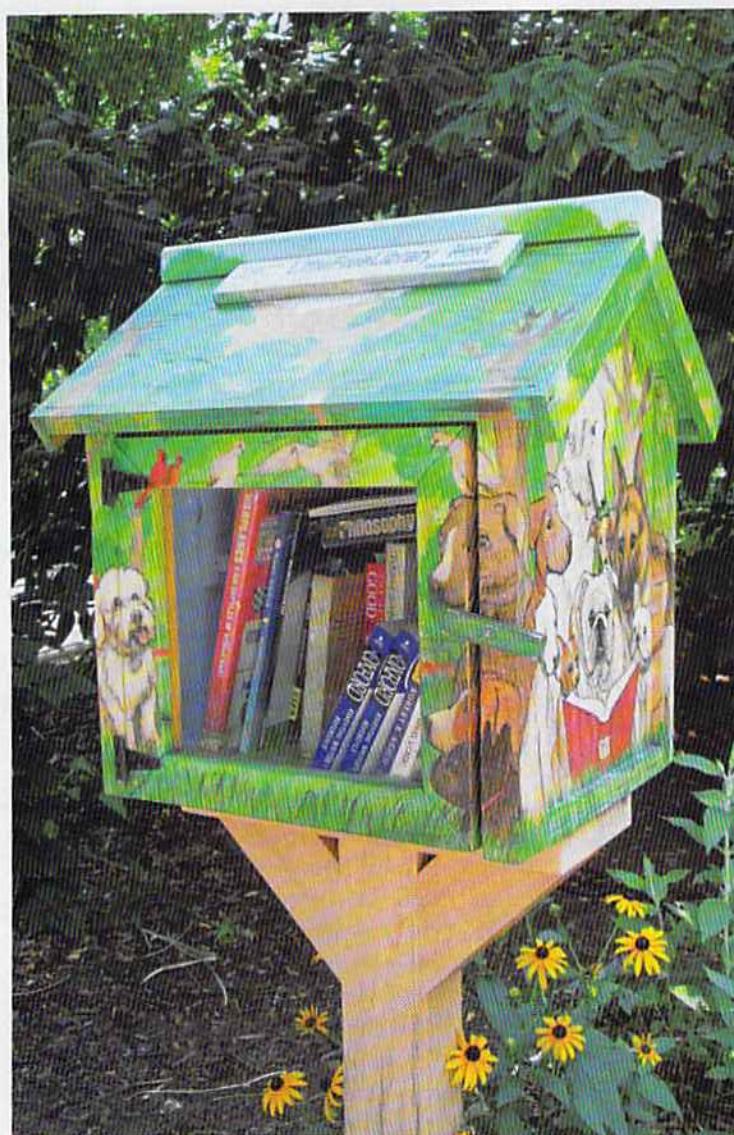


Photo: Beyond My Ken / CC-BY-SA, L.O.

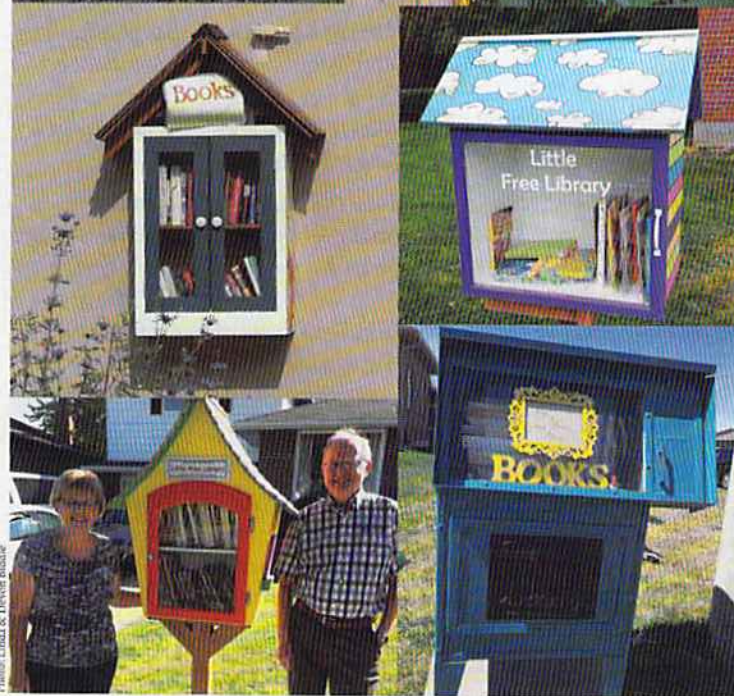


Photo: Harday / CC-BY-SA, L.O.

Photo: Kelly Thompson

Photo: Linda & Deven Biddle

says Yvonne. "It's magical. In this day and age, when kids are so glued to their iPads, Nintendo, etc., it's wonderful to see them go old school and read a book."

Rob and his family went the extra mile to promote their library, printing flyers and creating a facebook page where users can find out about the latest titles and leave comments about their experience. "I'm getting lots of notes about what a good thing it is for the community," says Rob. And although he doesn't see many other mini libraries in Markham, his has been a wild success. "We get lots of traffic," he reports. "In the winter, we see tracks in the snow going in and out."

Rob hopes to add a geo-caching designation to his site, with trinkets and log book hidden near or in the book box to entice even more visitors. "Hopefully, people will take a book too!"

A community effort

The Rotary Club of Peterborough has jumped on the book box trend in a big way, creating 25 Little Free Libraries last year to celebrate their 25th anniversary. "With literacy being so important locally and with Rotary International, we decided this project was perfect for us," says president Wendy Swain.

The making of the boxes was a community affair – a local company donated wood, Fleming College students built the boxes, and high school art students did the decorating. Local homeowners could register for a library on their property, which came stocked with titles.

The boxes have become a very visible and integral part of the Peterborough community, Wendy reports. All over town, she sees individuals and families ambling up to the boxes on foot or by bike for a look see. Wendy herself is the proud owner of one of these little libraries, which has daily visitors. And "every month or so, as I switch up the books, I see the neighbours open their blinds," she laughs.

In Oshawa, Devon and Linda Biddle's Little Free Library sees constant traffic, thanks to its whimsical design and unique location. It's easy to see its appeal, with its sloping roof, wooden shingles, and bright colours – a "Dr. Suess feel," says Devon who built the box. Surrounded by several schools on a busy street, it offers book-cruising opportunities for both teens and elementary students, all of whom make the rounds. The Biddles especially enjoy spying little kids at the box, their upper bodies invisible behind it, but "their little legs dancing, as they look at the titles back and forth."

It's not just the kids who welcome the little library. "Our neighbourhood certainly loves it," says Linda. "It's amazing the number of people who stop and comment on what a wonderful idea it is." Linda and Devon make a point of visiting other little libraries when they travel, an idea parents may want to emulate. Generating interest in reading can be

challenging for parents, but when vacations are interwoven with map-reading to source new books, even the faintest reading fan will appreciate the sense of adventure!

Benefits abound

Book boxes aren't just a benefit for families and the community, but also for the owner of the box. Yvonne points out that finding a home for used books is tricky, and book boxes fill that need. "Books are hard to sell because people want to read books but they don't want to pay money for used ones." She now helps Rob stock his book box with treasures she knows the community will value.

Kids also love being a part of the action, whether donating books of their own, decorating the family library or simply picking out a new title—all of which helps build excitement around reading and promoting literacy.

Mini libraries encourage people to stop



Photo: Rob Nicholson



Photo: Josh Laroche/CC-BY-SA-4.0

Tips To Make Your Own Library

- Check out Pinterest for ideas on unique book vessels.
- Use what you have! Leftover pieces of wood, fabric, markers and metal scraps are all inspirational components.
- Have the whole family contribute ideas and discuss in your family meeting!
- Above all, ensure your book box keeps books dry! Mould is detrimental to paper.
- Join littlefreelibrary.org to put your library on the map and to buy a pre-fabricated option that you can fully customize.
- Be creative! Use chalkboard paint, draw murals and find other ways to let your family's personality shine through.
- Assign each child one "side" of the book box to decorate however they wish.
- Create a log or comment book so your family can see how books are changing and improving your community!
- Have kids keep an eye out at local thrift stores and donation bins for books they would like to add to their library.
- Rotate stock. If some books sit stale for several weeks, have a stash of options in the basement to rotate books that might interest your neighbourhood. Or start a collection at your child's school or local organization.
- Ensure your library is secure on your own property (city regulations vary on whether they can be placed on boulevards, etc.).

and smell the proverbial roses, to sit and chat, pick a book, skim titles and perhaps discuss what new treats have been added to the stockpile. Set out a book box and watch locals flock!

Kelly S. Thompson is a writer and editor based in Trenton, Ontario. She enjoys books, her dog, Pot Roast, and more books.