

Andrea's mini-library hangs at the foot of her driveway, between the trees, ferns, and such flowers as lilies, columbines, primroses, phlox, and daffodils. It was inspired by their home.

The New Life of Books

Of course you can keep a book after reading it, to cherish it, and display it in a bookcase. But here's another idea: pass it on, so someone else can read it. Journalist Caroline Buijs discovers the possibilities.

Missing in front of a bookcase: there's pleasure in that. Looking at the spines of the books on your own shelves can remind you of wonderful reading experiences and recall, "Oh yes, that's why I always loved this book!"

Taking a book off the shelves, feeling the paper, letting the pages flip through your fingers, appreciating a well-designed cover... all of that can be so nice. Recently, a friend said, "There's no smaller space where so many worlds come together and so much wisdom is stored than in a bookcase." That's true. And sometimes a bookcase can serve as a kind of index of your knowledge and influences. And haven't all of us book lovers, at one time or another, secretly scanned the shelves of a friend or potential lover's homes to assess their taste: what books have they got?"

Frankly, I still do that the first time I visit someone's home. If they have books by my favorite writers, I often think: "Ah! My kind of people!" This kind of bookshelf appreciation is nowhere better expressed than on bookshelfporn.com, a website where we get to admire all kinds of stacks, in historic libraries, bookshops, and private homes, including shelves arranged in the shape of Christmas trees or an American map (one state per shelf).

BACK AMONG PEOPLE

But. A house can be cluttered by too many books, and you might want to see a bit of wall every once in a while. More and more of my friends, often after moving, don't have even one bookcase in their new home. Books are unwieldy and expensive to move, to be sure, but what do we do without bookcases in our homes? In the beginning, I felt that the walls were terribly bare and impersonal. Is the rise of the e-reader making the bookcase disappear from home interiors? If we

want to find a special passage in a book, it's usually much simpler to search full texts online.

But apparently, people do still love paper books. According to *The New Yorker* magazine, a visit to the bookstore is still the most common way that people find new books, and 97 percent of people who have ever read an e-book are still attached to the paper book. So, maybe we'll just keep both forms. But in the meantime, what do we do with our books?

LITTLE LIBRARIES

In 2009, Todd Bol of Hudson, Wisconsin, built what looked like a large birdhouse resembling a one-room schoolhouse, but with a glass door in front instead of a bird feeder. He filled it with books and put it on a post in his front yard with a sign that read, "Free Books."

Todd was inspired, in part, by the "take a book, leave a book" piles or boxes he'd seen in cafés and public spaces, where people share second-hand books, anonymously and for free. He teamed up with Rick Brooks of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who helped him promote the idea, and he built more of his little boxes and started giving them away. Together, they created littlefreelibrary.org, to promote the idea of free book exchanges.

Now, more than 4,000 people worldwide are officially connected with Todd and Rick's littlefreelibrary.org. But there are probably far more people who have their own little libraries and haven't officially registered. In January 2014, the total number of Little Free Libraries in the world was estimated to be nearly 15,000 in 55 countries.

Lieke Ploeger created her own little library in The Hague in February 2013, after she had seen one in Berlin. She thought it would be a fun project for the dreary winter. "The nice thing about it is that it brings the neighborhood together ➡

"Books should be among people and should not be left untouched, gathering dust on a shelf"

“Each Little Free Library is beautiful in its own way. We all share our love of reading”

when residents discover they can find new books so easily,” Lieke says. “It makes the neighborhood more attractive. It’s like a street-art alternative to all that advertising urging us only to buy more. It’s a bit of resistance against the consumer culture of today. I believe that people are happier giving away unnecessary stuff rather than buying it.”

Lieke’s library is mounted on a pole beside a park bench, close to an old designated dog-walking zone and near a busy intersection. An ideal spot, she feels.

SHARING YOUR LOVE OF BOOKS

Andrea Warne from Montpelier, Vermont set up her mini-library in honor of her older sister, Jean Kay, who died in the spring of 2013. “My sister loved books her whole life long – like everyone else in our family – and she used to work as a school librarian,” explains Andrea. “When I told my brother that I wanted to build a Little Free Library for her, he said, ‘This is exactly what Jean would have loved.’” Now the little house of books stands at the foot of Andrea’s steep driveway. She invited all the neighbors, family members, and friends to the official opening of the mini-library. Her husband built it out of cedar wood: it’s a waterproof house, inspired by their own home. It even has the same attic window, behind which is an old black-and-white photo of Andrea, her sisters,

STRAY BOOKS SOUGHT (OR FOUND)

- * Bookcrossing.com: "library of the world"
- * Littlefreelibrary.org: "take a book, return a book"

START YOUR OWN LITTLE FREE LIBRARY

- Tips from Lieke Ploeger:
1. Find a good, preferably busy, place to put your book box.
 2. Buy or make a waterproof box.
 3. Gather your first collection of books.
 4. Post the book box and spread the good news!
 5. If you want yours to become an official Little Free Library (you don't need to, of course), register it on littlefreelibrary.org. For \$34.95, you support the organization and get a free starter pack with a Little Free Library sign, stickers and leaflets, plus a listing on their world map.

mother, grandmother, and aunt.

Andrea lives at the end of a quiet street, so it took a while before other people discovered the little library. “But now more people are visiting and I think they’re exchanging about five to ten books a week,” she says. Andrea began with a collection of 30 books, which she tried to make as varied as possible. On the bottom shelf are children’s books, and on top are sci-fi, crime, literary classics, and non-fiction. On the first page of each book, there’s an explanation of how the system works. “I’ve just decided to add that you needn’t return more than you borrow, because the library is starting to overflow a bit,” Andrea says.

Lieke’s Little Free Library was also a success right from the start. After barely a week, all the books had changed owners. Every morning, she walks past and almost always sees a new book. She also knows some of the regular users who come here every week.

“A twelve-year old girl has been a fan right from day one,” she says. “She comes regularly to swap a book and in the front of every book she leaves behind, she writes a bit about what she thought of the book, like a little review.” Lieke began her library with some 30 to 40 books that she’d gathered through various channels – recycled, her own collection, her friends’ books, and so on. The first collection was a selection of novels, travel books, children’s books, and cookbooks. The reactions were very positive. Blogs took notice, and she was interviewed on local radio. In its first week on Facebook, her group got 100 followers, and now she’s heading toward 1,000. What Andrea likes most about free libraries is how they bring people together. “Each is beautiful in its own way,” she says. “We all share our love of reading, and we promote books and a sense of community.”

BOOKS IN THE WILD

If running a mini-library seems like too much of a hassle, there are other ways to share your books, one at a time. BookCrossing is a relatively recent phenomenon that has also become popular across the globe. The concept is simple: you register your book online at bookcrossing.com, then label your book, leave it somewhere for someone else to find, and track where it goes. Established in 2001, bookcrossing.com aims to “connect people through books.” Once you’ve read a book, you can share it with others, and then follow its progress through the world. According to the website, there are currently 1.2 million BookCrossers around the world and 10.2 million books traveling through 132 countries. Almost 30 percent of the BookCrossers are in the US, with the greatest number of



TEXT CAROLINE BUIJS PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREA WARNE, JOHN PHELAN, HOLLANSE HOOGTE

registered BookCrossers, 336,000. Germany is second, with 16 percent of registered BookCrossers, followed by the UK (13 percent), the Netherlands (11 percent) and Finland (10 percent). Some books tend to remain in the same language region; those in English really go anywhere.

You can “release” your books in one of two ways: if you give them to a friend or stranger, it’s called “controlled release.” If you leave books for someone to find on the seat of a train, in your favorite café, or on a park bench, then that’s a “wild release.” The latter is by far the most popular way. But before you release your book into the wild, you must first register it on the site. You then receive a code called a BookCrossing ID, which lets you track your book. Think of it as a kind of passport to follow your book’s journey round the world without getting lost. If anyone finds your book and registers your ID on the site, then the book has been “caught.” *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel is the most shared book on the site (recording more than 50,000 registered readers), and a copy of *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster is in the top three of most widely traveled books.

Still, even with all this sharing, some people want to hold onto their books, and feel a sense of regret when they give them away. Recently, one of my friends, who had rid her house (in this case a houseboat) of books, told me that she’d gone down into the hold, looking for her boxes full of books. She’d missed them terribly.

“It was like rediscovering a part of myself. Beautiful

RIVERHEAD'S LITTLE LIBRARIES

American publisher Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House, has launched its own Little Free Library program to give away its books to readers in poor neighborhoods across the US. Each little library will be filled with Riverhead titles to start, and the public will be encouraged to “take a book, leave a book,” so that the library collection will grow organically over time. The libraries were designed by in-house designer Helen Yentus, and built by Dan Bina and Aaron Black of Kahokia, a design partnership in Brooklyn. The first two will be placed in Rochester, New York and Reno, Nevada.

philosophy books, poetry books... they formed me. And I still want to read them. Now I have a small studio where I can put the books that inspire me, the ones I really want to keep. It’s not so many. Books I’ve bought more recently often have less value. Those I give away. I try to find books that give me something, like Saul Bellow’s last novel. Now I have a shelf of to-read books. And the rest is back down in the hold.” ●