

# Hunger for Books

by Scott Russell Sanders

1. I visited the library once a week, first with my mother, and then, when Sandra learned to drive, with my sister, and eventually on my own. Early on, I chose my weekly reading downstairs, where the children's books called to me from the midst of banners, mobiles, stuffed animals, and model dinosaurs. Perhaps because of those models, at first I imagined that all of these books had been made ages ago, like fossils, and that all of the people who wrote them had long since died, and that authors, like dinosaurs, were now extinct.
2. Then on one of my visits I noticed a shelf labeled "New Books." Curious, I drew out a shiny volume, opened it gingerly, heard the stiff spine creak, ran my fingers over the unblemished pages, lowered my nose to smell the fresh glue and ink. Then I opened another and another. They were indeed brand new. But where had they come from? When I asked the librarian, she explained that authors, unlike dinosaurs, were far from extinct. In fact, she said, thousands of new books were published every year. At that moment, standing in the children's room of the library in Ravenna, Ohio, I realized that if there were still people writing such fresh and fragrant books, then maybe one day I could write some as well.
3. All these years later, after making more than twenty books of my own, I still feel the miraculous power in language, whether written or spoken, the same power I felt when I sang a train into motion and I learned the name of snake and Sandra taught me the alphabet on the screened porch of our farmhouse in Memphis. How extraordinary, that a few sounds or a few squiggles can rouse up people and voices and landscapes in our minds! Like sunshine, like the urgency of spring, like bread, language is so familiar that we easily forget what an amazing gift it is.
4. Today, using a library that contains millions of volumes, I recognize that my childhood library in Ohio, which seemed so enormous, was actually quite small. It seemed enormous to me because, week by week, year by year, I

passed through those library doors into the great world of human thought and art and story. Reading the books I found there, I went on adventures; I dived under the sea and climbed mountains; I met explorers and baseball players and scientists; I learned the names of rocks and birds and butterflies; I learned how to build log cabins, how to launch model rockets, how to trap muskrats; I roved through the past and all over the earth and even beyond the earth; I studied the planets and the stars; I dreamed my way to the beginnings of time and to the ends of the universe.

5. A library is a storehouse, preserving what humans have learned, generation by generation, in every land, but it is a storehouse with doors and windows and hallways opening outward to the vast, sprawling, worldwide treasure trove of human knowledge. Surely this is what most clearly distinguishes us as a species, the ability to accumulate knowledge and to pass it on. We pass it on by word of mouth, we pass it on by example, we pass it on in films and tapes and disks, in magazines and newspapers, but above all we pass it on in books.
6. Libraries have become, of course, much more than houses for books. They've become knots in the global web of information. However, in this age of new devices for storing and transmitting knowledge—from videotapes to CD-ROMs, from cable television to the Internet—I'm still devoted to the humble book. A book requires no electricity. It is portable, made for the hand and pocket. It invites but does not demand our attention, and it leaves us time to think. We can enter or leave a book just as we choose, and we can interrupt our reading to burp a baby or pay a bill or ponder a cloud. A good book appeals to what is best in us, without trying to sell us anything. Books may become dated, of course, yet never because of some shift in technology or because their parts wear out, and the best of them are more durable than any manufactured product.
7. I'm not foolish enough to believe that books will survive merely because I love them, or because I write them, or because they've shaped my life. By comparison with films or videos or computer bulletin boards, a good book requires more from us in the way of intelligence and imagination and

memory, and that makes it vulnerable to its glitzy competitors; but a book also rewards us more abundantly. The best books invite us to share in a sustained, complex, subtle effort to make sense of things, to understand some portion of our humanity and our universe. As long as there are people hungry for such understanding, there will be people hungry for books. My own hunger set in long before I could read, back when ink marks on the page were still an impenetrable mystery, and yet even now, after devouring so many thousands of books, I am as ravenous as ever.

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# The Low-Tech Appeal of Little Free Libraries

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The “take a book, return a book” boxes are catching on even in places where Kindles and brick-and-mortar libraries abound.

1. When a 36-year-old bibliophile in Daegu, South Korea, sat down at his computer and googled the word “library,” he didn’t expect to find anything particularly noteworthy. But as DooSun You scrolled through the results, an appealingly anti-tech concept popped up.
2. The Internet led him to Little Free Libraries—hand-built boxes where neighbors can trade novels, memoirs, comics, and cookbooks, and connect with each other in the process.
3. The little libraries immediately appealed to DooSun. “Reading books is one of the most valuable things in my life. I think a book is equal to a treasure,” he says. “I hoped to share that feeling with my neighbors—that’s the reason I wanted a Little Free Library.” The website showed pictures of the diminutive structures standing in front yards, on city curbs, and alongside country roads all over the world, along with their GPS locations. “The Little Free Library map was a treasure map,” he says.
4. Soon after his online discovery, DooSun built a Little Free Library—the first one in South Korea—in front of his apartment building. Then he built a second at a different spot. Then a third. Slowly, his “take a book, return a book” libraries began bringing people together, garnering book donations and handwritten notes of thanks from strangers. He now pastes a QR code on the front of each library, so passersby can use their smartphones to learn more about them, and he regularly exchanges emails with others who want to build their own. He recently started a Facebook group where other Little Free Library stewards throughout Asia can swap ideas and experiences—as easily as visitors to their libraries swap physical books.

5. In 2009, Todd Bol built the first Little Free Library in the Mississippi River town of Hudson, Wisconsin, as a tribute to his mother—a dedicated reader and former schoolteacher. When he saw the people of his community gathering around it like a neighborhood water cooler, exchanging conversation as well as books, he knew he wanted to take his simple idea farther. English I Page 28 © Penny Yi Wang/Doha News
6. “We have a natural sense of wanting to be connected, but there are so many things that push us apart,” Bol says. “I think Little Free Libraries open the door to conversations we want to have with each other.”
7. Since then, his idea has become a full-fledged movement, spreading from state to state and country to country. There are now 18,000 of the little structures around the world, located in each of the 50 states and in 70 countries—from Ukraine to Uganda, Italy to Japan. They’re multiplying so quickly, in fact, that the understaffed and underfunded nonprofit struggles to keep its world map up to date.
8. Khalid and Yasmin Ansari, who live in Qatar, say they get a special satisfaction out of seeing their six-year-old son Umayr’s Little Free Library represented on the website. “When looking at the LFL world map,” says Khalid, “you almost feel obliged to have one in the neighborhood to fill the gap. It’s like doing your part in your part of the world.”
9. In some places, Little Free Libraries are filling a role usually served by brick-and-mortar libraries; the organization’s Books Around the Block program, for example, aims to bring LFLs to places where kids and adults don’t have easy access to books. In North Minneapolis, an area more often in the news for shootings than community engagement, the Books Around the Block initiative set up 40 of the little libraries. Two hundred more sprung up shortly thereafter.
10. Last year, Sarah Maxey of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, discovered Little Free Libraries when browsing the crowdfunding site Kickstarter. She was then inspired to launch her own LFL Kickstarter campaign. The response

was enthusiastic: By the time the campaign ended, Maxey had raised more than \$10,000 for her cause—enough money to build dozens (and dozens) of little libraries.

11. “What happens is, you start the momentum, and then the community—the Lions Club, the Rotary, the churches, the neighbors—steps up and builds more. It just keeps going,” Bol says.
12. Individual stewards are using their Little Free Libraries in altruistic ways, too. Tina Sipula of Clare House, a food pantry in Bloomington, Illinois, does more than distribute groceries; she distributes books via an on-site Little Free Library. As she points out, homeless people don’t have addresses—which means they can’t get public library cards. Linda Prout was instrumental in bringing dozens of Little Free Libraries to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and Lisa Heydlauff of Bihar, India, is working to bring a thousand Little Free Libraries to girls’ schools in her country, filling them with books that teach business and entrepreneurial skills.
13. “Little Free Libraries create neighborhood heroes,” says Bol. “That’s a big part of why it’s succeeding.”
14. Though they owe their spread largely to the Internet, Little Free Libraries often serve as an antidote to a world of Kindle downloads and data-driven algorithms. The little wooden boxes are refreshingly physical—and human. When you open the door, serendipity (and your neighbors’ taste) dictates what you’ll find. The selection of 20 or so books could contain a Russian novel, a motorcycle repair manual, a Scandinavian cookbook, or a field guide to birds.
15. For many people—particularly in more affluent areas where libraries abound—this sense of discovery is an LFL’s main appeal. A girl walking home from school might pick up a graphic novel that gets her excited about reading; a man on his way to the bus stop might find a volume of poetry that changes his outlook on life. Every book is a potential source of inspiration.

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