



People
 weekly
 JANUARY 22, 2001

"People need books," says Wattenberg (amid the stacks at his Baltimore charity). "And I want to give away as many as possible."

Tome Ranger

Bartender-turned-book-benefactor Russell Wattenberg hands Baltimore's needy readers a new leaf on life

As a bartender in Baltimore, Russell Wattenberg heard plenty of woeful tales from his customers. Broken hearts, broken dreams . . . all he could do was listen. But one night in the spring of 1997, as he overheard a few public school teachers bemoaning their students' lack of books, Wattenberg figured he could do more than commiserate. Taking \$70 of his tip

money, the 28-year-old Brooklyn native spent the following weekend going to yard sales, where he picked up 250 used books for the teachers. "You don't find somebody like this every day," says Andreas Spiliadis, one of the teachers Wattenberg helped. Within a few weeks, scavenging for literary finds became a weekly event for Wattenberg, who started buying books for anyone in need of a

read, from impoverished children to cash-strapped adults. "I love seeing books go from somewhere they're not wanted to somewhere they are," he says. So much so that by November of 1999 Wattenberg, a bachelor, quit bartending to found the non-profit Book Thing of Baltimore, which collects unwanted books from individuals and publishers and gives them to those in need. Supported by grants and donations, he now hands out about 9,500 volumes each week. "It's social justice to him," says Sally Scott, program officer for the Morris Goldseker Foundation, a Book Thing sponsor. "[He believes] people deserve and need books, whatever their background." Actually his motivation is less complex. Says Wattenberg: "It makes me feel good." ●