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[illegible]



Anne Daniells next to her Little Free Library.

Millions of deaths worldwide, devastating illnesses, long-lasting disruptions in health care, education, and economies. That's a horrifying legacy, but Covid-19 did give us at least one good thing:

The Little Free Library outside the Daniells house in San Diego.

You've probably seen a Little Free Library in your neighborhood. You may even operate one, a job that the nonprofit organization that runs this worldwide network calls steward. About 150,000 wooden book boxes stand bravely near streets and walkways in 115 countries. They have shared an estimated 250 million books, according to the folks at littlefreelibrary.org, a statistic that should fortify your faith in humanity.

Those who buy or make a little library and pay the forty bucks for official registration and a library plaque can have their location posted on [Little Free Library's searchable worldwide map](#). The stewards can write a brief description of their library for the map. I thought the one Anne Daniells wrote was particularly intriguing: "Small collection of adult, youth and children's books. A gift from my literary daughter during the 2020 pandemic."

So I had to call her. It helped that I live only a few blocks away.

At the start of the pandemic, Anne's daughter, Marian, lived in Brooklyn, a place the virus smacked early and hard. Combine coping with a public health catastrophe, a family tradition of sending care packages to each other, and a love of books, and pretty soon you have a Little Free Library on a sturdy post near the curb of a quiet city street.

"It was a surprise arrival in the mail, which was lovely," Anne said. She and Marian had talked about the idea earlier.

"I think the communal aspect of it appealed to her."

Marian knew the project would likely mean her dad would be putting it in place, so she called him before sending it to make sure he was on board with the idea. No problem. Marian bought a library through the organization's website, and soon the wooden box and official plaque were on the way to San Diego.

She has since moved from Brooklyn but still lives and works as a marketing consultant in the New York City area.

"Brooklyn has a culture of 'stooping'—where residents leave things they don't want but that still have value—on their stoops or corners," Marian wrote in an email. "The whole borough functions like a Little Free Library, manifesting objects right when they are most needed. I have a dog and would occasionally pass by a local Little Free Library on our walks."

Just the sight of a neighbor's thoughtfulness brought her joy and "likely inspired the kernel of the idea for my parents," she wrote.

Once Anne put some stain on the wooden library, and when she and her husband, Brian, got it placed near the street, the fun began. She keeps a total of about twenty-five books in the Little Free Library and a separate box of books for kids atop the official library. She checks it at least weekly to see if something new should be added or if the stock is low.

"One of the beautiful aspects is that it takes on a life of its own," she said. "It really starts to reflect what people are looking for. I've had people come by when we've been outside and ask for a specific book that they saw the week before, but it's gone."

The library practically runs itself because most users abide by the Little Free Library motto: Take a book, share a book. You don't have to bring back that

same book, nothing is ever overdue, and don't worry about fines, assuming your public library still does the fine thing. I mention that only because I heard that long ago a young boy in the Chicago area developed irrational anxiety about deadlines because he would have had to pay a two-cent fine if his book was overdue by a day. Anne can't remember an instance when anyone has returned a particular book, but most people bring something else to fill in for whatever they are taking. The circle remains unbroken, as the song says.

The offerings outside Anne's house can change without her adding or subtracting anything.

"Sometimes there are completely different books in there. Completely different," Anne said of patrons' efforts to help the library regenerate itself. "I had no idea."

She occasionally pulls something that hasn't attracted attention and donates it elsewhere, and she always makes sure kids' books are available. She's been known to haunt Friends of the Rancho Peñasquitos Branch Library book sales in search of kids' books she can buy and make available at her house. And she'll add a sticky note once in a while to a book she's read—a fun beach read, for example—to help readers decide what to pick.

And Marian said she left boxes of books in the attic of her parents' house, so an emergency supply exists.

Little Free Libraries are more about serendipity than search engines. You don't reserve anything online. As efficient as it is to use your public library's website to see what is available, that's not what you should expect or want at a Little Free Library. You go to see what surprise awaits.

Readers finding books are not the only people to benefit from a Little Free Library. The steward gets a share. Anne and Brian were finishing up some home remodeling about the time the little library arrived, and the revamp included plopping a couple of rocking chairs in a front-yard area that's perfect for watching sunsets. Maybe it's because the street is hilly, or maybe it's the sizable jacaranda tree out front, but they occasionally get to sit unnoticed and observe as take a book, share a book unfolds.

"I've seen cars pull right in front, kids get out and look and get back in, and they don't even know we're watching. That's kind of fun," Anne said.

But don't get the idea that she is hiding. She reconnects with neighbors and meets new people, all because a nonprofit in Minnesota (and her daughter) sent her a small wooden box.

In turn, the neighbors watch out for their Benavente Street treasure. If Anne and Brian have been out of the house and it starts to rain, neighbors will sometimes hustle out to get the books and put them on the covered porch to make sure they won't get damaged. Do you find that hard to believe? I mean the part about rain in Southern California.

It also turns out that Little Free Libraries can serve a purpose other than sharing books, even if the people who established the organization a decade ago could not have foreseen such a thing.

For an example, back to Brooklyn and the pandemic:

"LFLs and other community resources were repurposed—instead of books, neighbors stocked the library with canned food, homemade masks, and resources for those in need," Marian reported. "I loved that the library could be a platform for sharing and accessing whatever one might need ... Sometimes, you need to put food on the table. Other times, you need to disappear into historical fiction."

And I ask you to suspend disbelief one more time: Vandalism is not a concern for most Little Free Libraries. Anne hasn't experienced any, although she gets the occasional real estate agent or financial services guy slipping a brochure among the books.

Anne, whose eclectic interest in authors runs from Tom Robbins to Cormac McCarthy to Stephen King (but not the vampire stuff) to Robert Pirsig to Susan Cain to Shakespeare to Malcolm Gladwell to O. Henry and more, and Marian, who prefers nonfiction, especially nonfiction "that has some personality," have established one of the twenty Little Free Libraries in the 92129 ZIP code. While those of you who live far from San Diego (I regret this has happened to you) may not be able to visit her library, chances are good that a Little Free Library is near you. All you need to do is check [the map on the organization's site](#).



Louise Penny and Kurt Vonnegut. What's not to like?

As anyone would do, I tried to find comparative statistics so we could see how ZIP codes, states, or regions compare in number of Little Free Libraries, overall and per capita. Not possible, the Little Free Library folks say. Too bad because I anticipated taking another heartless and unnecessary jab at Wyoming or Montana, a hobby of mine ever since a newspaper friend left San Diego to work up that way, where he was born and raised, in a prominent position for which he was well-qualified.

“We offer the map and our mobile app for public use, but we cannot pull ZIP code reports for media, unfortunately. As a small nonprofit organization, that is beyond our staff capacity,” Little Free Library’s Margret Aldrich told me. She is their director of communications.

Got it. I surveyed the entire staff at nominally for-profit jcannonbooks to see if they understood such reasoning, and I answered myself that I could. And did you notice that Margret referred to me as the media? Back in the game, baby.

I am not smart enough to overlay the nation’s ZIP code boundaries on the available library location map and turn the resulting data into a spreadsheet, a task that the least skilled kid coming out of a journalism school could accomplish these days. But I have analog digital skills, which is to say, ten fingers.

I have counted twenty Little Free Libraries in ZIP code 92129, a fourteen-square-mile chunk of the city of San Diego, and twelve in the Cheyenne, Wyoming, greater metropolitan area. Cheyenne is the capital and largest city in Wyoming (66,000 residents). Unfair, statistically nonsensical comparison? Of course it is, but just because Wyoming is the least populated state and has more mountains, cattle, sheep, and maybe kangaroos than people, we should ignore this imbalance? Even cowboys need books. By the way, littlefreelibrary.org has international reach, and its map lists only six locations in Dublin, James Joyce's hometown. Further anecdotal evidence that no one has actually read *Ulysses*.

But cowboy or urban dweller, young or old, lover of fiction or nonfiction, and no matter where you live, the Little Free Library is on to something. So here's to the Daniells family and others like them who have lightened our viral load.

Next time you are railing against whomever you prefer to rail against for saddling us with something that causes unnecessary deaths, disruptions, and misery, you could reflect upon how the presence of that virus also opened doors to enrichment—doors on little wooden structures near curbs in your neighborhood. Any day is better with a good book.



The official plaque

Glad I read that

Anthony Marra, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*:

She wanted to hold foreign syllables like mints on her tongue until they dissolved into fluency.

*

Craig Lancaster, *And It Will Be a Beautiful Life*

“Best Italian place in Michigan,” he asserted. He had no way of backing up that contention, but why let evidentiary technicalities infringe on a perfectly good case of surety? The best place anyplace was the place he knew there. He had dozens of them.

*

Emily St. John Mandel, *Sea of Tranquility*:

Everything offended Jessica, which is inevitable when you move through the world in search of offense.

Reader tip (another free service from jcannonbooks): Part of this inventive book is set in 2203, and the most interesting details are not the hovercraft, bots, moon colonies, or other stock sci-fi stuff, but the fact that the main character of this section is an author on a book tour. Imagine it: Two hundred years from now, and we still have novels. All is not lost. Whew, I nearly just used an exclamation point.

Kind regards,
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September 2022



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