



B-Sides Press

**FieldWork**

a B-Sides Press Publication

09|01|2020

# Little Free Libraries: A Necessity or A Luxury?

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## B Sides Fall 2020

<http://ir.uiowa.edu/bsides/40>

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Special thanks to Andrea Martin and Justin Houston, Co-editors-in-Chief from 2019-2020 for efforts in re-establishing B-Sides.

### **Abstract:**

“Little Free Libraries: A Necessity or A Luxury?” explores recent development in community driven and managed book collections housed in freely accessible ‘micro-libraries’— small, often outdoor housings for books, inspired by Tod Boll and Rick Brooks efforts. Little Free Libraries have spread across the North American continent and the world.

**Keywords:** Little Free Libraries | community | literacy | diy

**Note:** This article was delayed in publication due to staffing and continuity challenges at B Sides.

## Introduction

The idea for Little Free Libraries began in 2009 when Todd Bol constructed a model of a one-room schoolhouse in honor of his mother who had recently passed away. The intention behind this model was to house books that members of his community could take from and donate to at their leisure. The idea started to catch on and Bol was soon constructing Little Free Libraries for his friends and neighbors. He eventually partnered with Rick Brooks to create the website [littlefreelibrary.org](http://littlefreelibrary.org). In just four years, the number of Little Free Libraries around the country and around the world has seen rapid increase. As of 2014, there are over 14,000 Little Free Libraries in over 50 countries.

But what purpose are they serving? On their website, Bol and Brooks give visitors this mission statement: “To promote literacy and the love of reading by building free book exchanges worldwide” and to “build a sense of community as we share skills, creativity and wisdom across generations.” Additionally, they had a goal of creating 2,510 Little Free Libraries, the same number of libraries that philanthropist Andrew Carnegie sponsored.<sup>1</sup> Though Bol and Rick Brooks have greatly surpassed their goal of Little Free Libraries, whether they achieved all they set out to do in their mission statement is debatable.

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Bol and Rick Brooks, “What Is a Little Free Library?” *LittleFreeLibrary.org*, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://littlefreelibrary.org/faqs/>.

### What Exactly are Little Free Libraries?

Little Free Libraries are structures usually situated in front of buildings such as schools, churches, or homes. They can be designed in whatever style and shape the owner chooses. Some are designed to look like schoolhouses, libraries, or birdhouses; others have non-specific paintings such as flowers or butterflies. Within the libraries are books, generally donated by members of communities or the organizations that help fund the cost of the Little Free Library. Most of the libraries have books that are for both children and adults. Some of the libraries even have themed books, which will be discussed later. Little Free Libraries have a “take a book, leave a book” policy. Anyone can take whatever book they like out of the library and can leave a book they want to share with others, but they do not have to leave a book in order to take one. Because the libraries are owned and run independently (from public libraries), they never close, books have no late fees, and there are no return dates.

### They’re Everywhere

The dramatic rise in Little Free Libraries around the country and around the world begs the question of why they have become so popular. People now have literacy at their fingertips, have access to information day or night, and have a place to explore literature autonomously or with other members of the community. The impact of Little Free Libraries is not without consequence, however. Without warning, Little Free Libraries have formed

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their own culture and community in which there are insiders and outsiders. This creates a problem when the outsiders are the ones in need of Little Free Libraries, and the insiders, though they already have Little Free Libraries in their neighborhoods, keep building them, often within a close vicinity of each other.

### The Problem

When Todd Bol began these Little Free Libraries, his intention was to promote literacy and build a sense of community. Many of the articles on Little Free Libraries highlight how much these miniature libraries have affected their communities in a positive way. However, these libraries are falling short of Bol's attempt to promote literacy. There is a lot of potential for Little Free Libraries to make a difference in communities, but currently they seem to be a fad. Little Free Libraries are a wonderful addition to communities and neighborhoods, but where they are located, the cost of building one, and the demographic that the libraries target, make them seem more of a feel-good addition rather than a community outreach.

One of the problems with Little Free Libraries is that they are situated in cities or towns that already have public libraries to which people have access. Going to a Little Free Library for people in these communities may just be an afterthought or a family outing. They are able to go to the public library, but going to a little library is more fun and is a place that is always

accessible after the public library closes for the night. Some communities are even concerning themselves with filling the libraries “with current popular titles that people want to read” and need funding to “purchase high-demand titles” (Laskey).<sup>2</sup> The neighborhoods that need Little Free Libraries are in rural towns where there is no public library or the parts of the city where people do not have a car to get to the library, the commute is too far so the library closes before they can get there, or there are people who are homeless and cannot get library cards because they have no proof of residence, which many libraries require.

Even though Little Free Libraries are found in cities or towns, they are usually exclusive to wealthier or more populated neighborhoods. This reason could be that Little Free Libraries are expensive to build. The cost of pre-designed libraries range anywhere from \$150 to over \$600, and if an individual or an organization wants a customized library, the cost is even higher. If a member of an impoverished community wants to purchase one, they might hesitate because of the price tag. On the Little Free Library’s website, there is a page where visitors can donate or apply for monetary support, but funds are limited and even if those who apply for support receive it, the money would only be for the actual library. They would need to provide

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Laskey, “Hall School Opens Little Free Libraries,” *Gainesville Times*, November 29, 2013, <https://www.gainesvilletimes.com/news/hall-schools-open-little-free-libraries/>.

their own materials to put inside the library, which could be a further deterrent to building a library.

Bol wants Little Free Libraries to promote a love of reading but those who do use Little Free Libraries already have a strong love of reading. In newspapers around the country, users of free libraries have stated that they “love books,” that it “feeds [their] addiction,” and that they are “gorgeous to look at” (Piasecki; Kebede; Jain).<sup>3</sup> For them, Little Free Libraries have become an accessory instead of a necessity and means of education. Patrons visit the libraries because it is fun and the libraries are pretty, not because they are unable to visit a public library. They find books to read for pleasure and donate ones they no longer need instead of books that will help them learn English or help their children become stronger readers. Those who need Little Free Libraries are people who do not have a car to drive to the library, or cannot find resources at the library because they do not know enough English to communicate with a librarian.

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<sup>3</sup> Joe Piasecki, “Little Free Library offers big concept - meet authors and neighbors,” *Glendale News-Press*, November 13, 2013. Nexis Uni;  
Rishabh R. Jain, “Little Library on the Prairie Comes to Town,” *Daily Iowan Online Edition*, November 8, 2012. <http://dailyiowan.lib.uiowa.edu/DI/2012/di2012-11-08.pdf>;  
Laura Kebede, “Little libraries spread big ideas: Project designed to encourage reading reaches 55 countries,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, October 22, 2013, [https://www.richmond.com/news/local/hanover/little-libraries-spread-big-ideas/article\\_cf37b220-7a04-59d5-9e47-75a9d21d22ca.html](https://www.richmond.com/news/local/hanover/little-libraries-spread-big-ideas/article_cf37b220-7a04-59d5-9e47-75a9d21d22ca.html)

### On A More Positive Note

Not all aspects of Little Free Libraries are negative, however. Having a Little Free Library can bring a community together in many ways. It gives community members a chance to collaborate on what literature goes into the libraries and to share the books they love with each other. Little Free Libraries never close, so people can always have a book in their hands whenever the desire strikes them and there are no late fees so they can have the book for as long as they like. Additionally, Little Free Libraries in areas of communities that are far from a public library can instill a love of reading and learning for people who may have never had that love previously. In Minnesota, the Minneapolis School District is working on collaborating with the Little Free Library organization to construct a library on every block in north Minneapolis, which is one of the most impoverished districts in the city. Another Minnesota-based company, the Mall of America, sponsored the creation of twenty libraries for the organization's Little Free Libraries Small Town Initiative. This initiative places little libraries in rural Minnesota and Wisconsin towns that have no public libraries.<sup>4</sup>

On a larger scale, Bol is teaming up with the non-profit organization Books for Africa to send Little Free Libraries across the continent to help spread education and end book famine. The Little Free Library movement

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<sup>4</sup> Claire Kirch, "Building Momentum for Little Free Libraries," *Publishers Weekly*, February 8, 2013. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/55891-building-momentum-for-little-free-libraries.html>.

has already affected over thirty-six countries worldwide, but the goal for Books For Africa is to send more than 2,000 free libraries across Africa ("Books For Africa and Little Free Library Team to Ship 'Little Libraries' to Africa").<sup>5</sup>

### Possible Solutions

The first solution is to have Little Free Libraries that are tailored to their communities. If there is a Little Free Library in a community with a largely non-English speaking population, the library selection could include books in that population's native language and also English as a Second Language books. Members of the community that use Little Free Libraries do so because they usually already have a strong love of reading. A library with books these people may find challenging, books that do not interest them, or books that are not in their native language, will not be used. Additionally, the libraries are generally filled with books donated from the patrons who also take them, so the books may be geared towards a certain demographic of readers instead of books that complement all levels of readers.

Little Free Libraries that are tailored to their locations can be a big step towards promoting literacy of many kinds. Structures found in front of schools could have books geared towards the grade levels that attend those schools. There could be Little Free Libraries in front of LGBTQ and youth centers, hospitals and clinics, and places of worship with books for all ages

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<sup>5</sup> "Books For Africa and Little Free Library Join Forces to Ship 'Little Libraries' to Africa," *Professional Services Close-Up*, January 24, 2013, Nexis Uni.

that provide information for people who may not want to talk with professionals that work at those given spaces. The possibilities for these types of libraries are endless. Giving these libraries a theme can already be seen in action in Iowa City, Iowa. In front of a funeral home there is a Little Free Library filled with books. On closer inspection, the library consists of books on grief. The Little Grief Library has a selection of books for adults and children on dealing with grief that people can access at any time without having to go inside the funeral home or the larger library within.

Another Little Free Library in DeKalb, Illinois is geared toward Spanish-speaking families. Evan King, the Jerry L. Johns Literacy Clinic outreach coordinator, points out that “a majority of Latino children aren’t literate in Spanish, while their parents aren’t literate in English”.<sup>6</sup> By stocking bilingual books, the city of DeKalb is giving these families a chance not only to read together, but also to learn together.

A second solution is to build Little Free Libraries lower to the ground. Most of the structures around Iowa City are at least five feet high and difficult for young children to reach on their own. Structures around the country may not be the same, but if Little Free Libraries are too difficult for children to reach, they will not be able to discover a love of reading on their own.

Building shorter Little Free Libraries, especially around schools, allows

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<sup>6</sup> Keisha Howerth, “Little libraries promote citywide literacy,” Northern Star, October 23, 2013, [https://northernstar.info/city/article\\_3c376b10-3ba0-11e3-a18b-001a4bcf6878.html](https://northernstar.info/city/article_3c376b10-3ba0-11e3-a18b-001a4bcf6878.html)

children to look through the collections on their own, find books that interest them, and even share the books they love with other classmates or children in their neighborhood.

Little Free Libraries are everywhere, but they are found predominantly in wealthier areas of neighborhoods or communities with public libraries. The Little Free Libraries for Small Towns initiative is a strong start to expanding the reach of literacy, but as of 2013, is confined to the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin. More programs such as this would give many communities and neighborhoods access to literature and other materials that were not previously available. Rural communities are not the only areas that could benefit from Little Free Libraries. The Minneapolis School District is working towards installing Little Free Libraries in its most impoverished districts but this effort needs to expand. Large cities all across the United States could improve literacy rates with the addition of Little Free Libraries for those who cannot access the public library.

There are Little Free Libraries in over fifty countries but the number of libraries in those countries is very sparse. According to the Little Free Library website's map, while there are over one hundred in the state of California alone, there is only one library in all of Russia, two in India and two in the South American continent. Other countries follow a similar pattern or have none at all. These numbers may not be entirely accurate since these are the

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only registered libraries, but it seems feasible that the Little Free Library movement has not caught on in other countries as it has in the United States. Books for Africa is one organization that is attempting to spread Little Free Libraries across the continent, but encouraging more organizations to reach out to countries elsewhere would be a worthwhile initiative.

### Conclusion

While Little Free Libraries have strengthened many communities and given people opportunities to share their most beloved books and discover new favorites, these little libraries still have a long way to go. Little Free Libraries have been most popular amongst neighborhoods and communities that can afford to build them but where they are most needed is where they cannot be found. Rural towns and small communities that do not have public libraries need them the most and the effort towards accomplishing this is off to a good start with the Little Free Libraries for Small Towns initiative. Additionally, Books for Africa is expanding the number of Little Free Libraries on a global scale. Right now Little Free Libraries are a trend on a steady increase. Hopefully with time, the percentage of Little Free Libraries built in more impoverished districts and rural communities— far from public libraries— will increase, giving them greater access to literature.

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