**Headline:** Little Free Library’s Not-So-Little Commitment to Getting the Word Out

**Teaser:** These book-sharing boxes promote literacy and strengthen communities.

By Damon Orion

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**Source:** Local Peace Economy

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/)*.*

**Tags:** Community, Book, Social Justice, Social Benefits, Food, Education, Activism, North America/United States of America. Indigenous Resistance, North America/Canada, South America/Brazil, Middle East/Sudan, Africa/Uganda, Asia/India, Africa, Oceania/Australia, Middle East/Afghanistan, Asia/Pakistan, Opinion

**[Article Body:]**

You’ve seen them in front of houses and public spaces like food stores, parks, schoolyards, and coffee shops; small, birdhouse-like cases that anyone can take a book from or leave a book in for others to enjoy.

These miniature libraries might have an unimposing appearance but are a powerful means of boosting literacy rates, combating book bans, and promoting social justice. They are also referred to as “mini-town squares.”

While anyone can create and curate public bookcases, the St. Paul, Minnesota-based nonprofit group [Little Free Library](https://littlefreelibrary.org/about/) (LFL) is largely responsible for their ubiquity. There are more than 180,000 registered LFL book-sharing boxes worldwide. They can be found in all 50 U.S. states and 121 countries across every continent, making them the “[world’s largest book-sharing network](https://littlefreelibrary.org/2022/10/national-little-free-library-nonprofit-moves-to-st-paul/).” In collaboration with schools, businesses, civic establishments, and public libraries, LFL has facilitated the sharing of more than 400 million books since 2009.

One of LFL’s primary motivations is to create a more literate populace. Their motto is, “[Take a book, share a book](https://littlefreelibrary.org/).” The importance of that objective cannot be overstated: [More than half](https://www.thenationalliteracyinstitute.com/post/literacy-statistics-2024-2025-where-we-are-now) the adults in America have literacy skills below the sixth-grade level, and [67 percent](https://dfyl.org/the-challenge) of students in the U.S. enter the fourth grade with reading skills that are below proficient levels, drastically [reducing](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/midwest/Ask-A-REL/10268) their chances of graduating from high school, according to studies.

Margret Aldrich, LFL’s director of communications and the author of [*The Little Free Library Book*](https://www.amazon.com/Little-Free-Library-Books-Action/dp/1566894077), points out that access to reading materials is a key [predictor](https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/bookaccess/index.html) of an individual’s success in school and throughout life. For example, in the United States, a child from a home with as few as 25 books will complete [two more years of school](https://teacher.scholastic.com/education/researchpdf/topic_paper/home-libraries.pdf) than a child with no books at home, according to a March 2023 report, “Home Libraries,” by Scholastic.

A 2001 study by childhood and literacy education professor Susan Neuman determined that some impoverished areas of the U.S. have only [one age-appropriate book per 300 children](https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/news/improving-childrens-literacy-book-deserts). To mitigate the lack of book access among [60 percent](https://www.comicrelief.org/posts/changing-illiteracy-in-the-u-s-with-early-initiatives) of children in low-income families, LFL works to “make sure Little Free Libraries are getting established in communities that really need access to books. Maybe there’s no public library; maybe there’s no access point for books when school is out [in these communities],” Aldrich explains.

To fight inadequate book access and substandard literacy levels among Indigenous communities in the [United States](https://www.umcjustice.org/latest/native-american-reading-and-literacy-demonstration-project-at-first-umc-in-pembroke-nc-8) and [Canada](https://roam.macewan.ca/items/1dd42eda-b754-40fd-bd59-87f2b04e4fe3), LFL [facilitates](https://littlefreelibrary.org/programs/indigenous-library-program/) the installation of miniature libraries in areas with large Indigenous populations through its Indigenous Library program. Little Free Libraries have also been [established](https://www.littleobservationist.com/little-free-library-interview-rick-brooks/) in Brazilian slums, South Sudanese villages, a Ugandan refugee camp, and other regions where books are scarce, according to the blog Little Observationist.

LFL’s past efforts have included the Good Global Neighbors program, through which American students constructed book-sharing boxes and sent them to countries like Africa and India, and the Friends Through the Years program, which brought young and old people together to read and tell stories to each other.

**Promoting Equality**

LFL’s [Read in Color](https://littlefreelibrary.org/programs/read-in-color/) program helps distribute books that promote social justice and racial equality and represent marginalized groups such as BIPOC and LGBTQ+. According to Aldrich, “This can be really important, both for folks who see themselves in the pages and for folks who can learn about a different perspective.”

Aldrich recounts a story she heard from the father of a six-year-old girl who took the book [*Ada Twist, Scientist*](https://www.amazon.com/Ada-Twist-Scientist-Andrea-Beaty/dp/1419721372) home from a Little Free Library. “On the cover was a girl who was Black like her and had puffy hair like hers. She said, ‘Daddy, this girl looks just like me!’” The girl then began “dressing up like a scientist at home and playing scientist. That kind of impact could last a lifetime.”

The Read in Color program stands in opposition to U.S. book bans, [nearly half](https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/2023-book-bans/) of which targeted BIPOC and LGBTQ+-themed books in 2023. Eighty-seven percent of polled LFL stewards have [shared](https://littlefreelibrary.org/2023/06/reading-is-a-right-how-little-free-library-fights-book-bans/) banned books, thereby “protecting access to banned and challenged books,” states the organization’s website. Little Free Library also helps readers access banned books through projects and initiatives such as the [Unbanned Book Club](https://c212.net/c/link/?t=0&l=en&o=3905453-1&h=3232496599&u=http%3A%2F%2Funbannedbookclub.com%2F&a=The+Unbanned+Book+Club), the [Banned Wagon](https://sites.prh.com/banned-books-menu), and the [Banned Books Week Coalition](https://bannedbooksweek.org/sponsors/).

“We are proud to take a stand against book bans,” Aldrich states. “Our mission is to expand access to books. That’s really at the heart of everything we do, so book bans go against our core values, especially when they overwhelmingly target Black authors, LGBTQ+ authors, and others from marginalized communities.”

**The History of LFL**

The late Todd Bol built the first Little Free Library in 2009 to honor the memory of his mother, a schoolteacher and book lover. Constructing and painting the box to look like a miniature schoolhouse, he placed his creation in front of his home in Hudson, Wisconsin. The idea started to catch on when Bol and his friend Rick Brooks began installing more of these receptacles in different parts of Wisconsin and other Midwestern United States cities like Chicago and Minneapolis.

In 2012, LFL became an incorporated nonprofit. During the same year, Bol met his goal of creating 2,510 Little Free Libraries, breaking the record philanthropist Andrew Carnegie previously set by [establishing](https://dp.la/exhibitions/history-us-public-libraries/carnegie-libraries) 2,509 libraries worldwide.

As this idea went viral, Bol began shipping homemade book boxes to regions such as Australia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. By late 2016, [50,000](https://bookriot.com/big-little-milestone-there-are-now-50000-little-free-libraries-worldwide/) registered Little Free Libraries could be found throughout [85](https://www.npr.org/2018/10/19/658962057/little-free-library-creator-todd-bol-dies) countries worldwide.

In late 2018, soon after LFL established its 75,000th library, Bol died of pancreatic cancer. A [quote](https://littlefreelibrary.org/about/history/) from his final days reads, “I really believe in a Little Free Library on every block and a book in every hand. I believe people can fix their neighborhoods, fix their communities, develop systems of sharing, learn from each other, and see that they have a better place on this planet to live.”

**Outside the Box**

Stewards (LFL’s name for the curators of book-sharing boxes) sometimes [stylize](https://www.npr.org/2012/03/07/148170088/little-free-libraries-hope-to-spark-lending-revolution) their little libraries in imaginative ways. This includes bookcases modeled after houses, cabins, trees, telephone booths, Victorian mansions, scenes from books, rocket ships, a refrigerator, a robot, and a life-sized replica of a [TARDIS](https://thedoctorwhosite.co.uk/tardis/) from the “Doctor Who” television series.

At a 2013 TEDx event, LFL’s founder [described](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5TJH5hmRE8&t=355s) a little library in Arkansas surrounded by an herb garden. Visitors could take a cookbook from the box and snip herbs from the garden. “[The steward] tells me he’s constantly getting food in the morning: quiches and so on that are left for him,” Bol said.

Besides bringing art to streets and neighborhoods, LFL’s efforts have [inspired](https://littlefreelibrary.org/2022/09/12-inspiring-alternate-little-library-ideas/) groups and individuals to create boxes for sharing items like seeds, knitting materials, sleds, and toy cars. Church-supported [Blessing Boxes](https://www.thehelmsandusky.com/features/blessingboxes.aspx) provide access to food, clothing, toiletries, baby care materials, and other essentials. These “miniature wooden food pantries” conform to the principles of mutual aid and are “symbols of hope and solidarity,” according to the digital news magazine the Helm.

**Making Connections**

As Aldrich notes, LFL also helps build community. She recalls the moment she and her husband finished installing a little library in front of their Minneapolis home. “Within three minutes of getting it in the ground, neighbors I’d never spoken with before were crossing the street to check it out and talk with us.”

She adds that according to LFL’s annual surveys, 72 percent of stewards [meet more neighbors](https://littlefreelibrary.org/about/) because of their little libraries, and 98 percent feel that their neighborhood is a friendlier place because of these book-sharing boxes.

Aldrich also says many LFL stewards enjoy being part of something larger than themselves. “This network is almost 200,000 Little Free Libraries strong all over the world, so [stewards] are part of this universal love for reading and bringing people together.”