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Take a Book. Leave a Book.

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

A sidewalk librarian shares the ups and downs of managing visitors whose book-lending behavior doesn't always measure up to her exacting (but reasonable!) standards.


Take a book,
leave a book

I COULDN'T WAIT TO get a sidewalk library because I loved the idea of being a ready repository of books for anyone who walked past my house. I assumed that being a neighborhood librarian was the ideal hobby for an avid reader who's married to another one.

After researching my options, I found a guy online who transforms old, weatherproof sidewalk newspaper boxes into little libraries. Since I'm a news junkie *and* a book lover, it was perfect for me. I ordered the bright teal version, and when I realized it had more inside space than I thought it would, I added a wire shelf to create two levels. My husband, John, and I anchored it into the ground cover at the edge of the walk and stocked it with our already-read books that were destined for the secondhand book shop. Boasting bright white lettering that said, "Take a book, leave a book," the library was a cheerful and inviting addition to the neighborhood. I was in business.

I expected that I would have pleasant conversations with nice people who were taking or leaving books, and that John and I would enjoy some new finds among the donations. Although those things did happen, I had no idea that my perfectionism and patience would be sorely tested by visitors whose actions provoked head shaking, muttering, and occasional profanity.

Almost immediately, I realized that closet-cleaners were rampant among my patrons. Those people may love to read, but in my experience, they are also declutterers who've decided that my library is a more convenient drop-off spot than the thrift store or their own trash bin. Maybe they can't bring themselves to throw books away, and I get that. It's a stab in the heart of any literature lover; however, you have to wonder about the people who thought I'd be happy to get a 1982 *Guinness Book of World Records*; a local *Diocesan Budget and Membership Directory*; a water-stained pocket dictionary with print too small to read; and a tattered 1970s computer science textbook. Did they think there were readers just waiting to discover those things? Of course not! I'm betting they were just focused on their Marie Kondo–esque tidying, without giving a thought to the nice librarian who would have to "recycle" their donations.

On the flip side, I do receive many, many real and readable books, including a significant number for children, making my library a sought-after destination for nearby parents, grandparents, and babysitters. However, I'm constantly dismayed by the generosity of people who leave substantial donations when there's not enough room for them. I am a neatnik who believes my belongings are a reflection



of me, and I tidy my library once a day. Sometimes twice. My aim is to maintain a perfect-for-browsing bottom shelf featuring a row of adult books with the titles visible; and a top shelf holding a stack of kids' books, arranged by size. And although I believe that an abundance of books is a wonderful thing 99.9 percent of the time, I am never happy to find a dozen books shoved willy-nilly into a space meant for three. Even worse, I don't like starting the day by discovering a bag of books left on the ground *beside* the library—rained on and ruined.

One morning, I found eight hardbacks that had been jammed into a space that was already ninety percent full, making it impossible to read any of the titles. It was time for action. I wanted to post a note with a pointed and sarcastic rebuke, but my neighbor, Tori, suggested a friendlier approach. She printed a little sign that we put on the inside of the pull-down door: "Welcome Readers! Take what interests you. Donate when you're through. To help us keep it organized, please only leave a few."

That worked, sort of, but I still found too many hefty donations too often. My next move involved creating a library annex in our master bedroom closet, which meant constantly removing and holding onto books from the library when there were too many, and replenishing the stock when there were too few. A daily ritual that didn't kill me, but often made me sigh.

A new type of frustrating patron popped up after holidays, when objects that appeared to be unwanted stocking stuffers landed in among the books. I don't blame the recipients for deciding not to keep them, but a library is not a regifting site. Imagine my reaction on the days I went to check my books and found a set of note cards featuring a photo of big-haired artist Bob Ross; a mini puzzle of the *Saved By the Bell* cast, circa 1989; a plastic seashell with a picture of a lighthouse; or a baggie filled with toy propellers. More trips to the trash, more annoyance at the unseen visitors who invariably left their inappropriate things during the night when I couldn't catch them in the act.

And speaking of having to curate the contents of the library, it never occurred to me that curation would extend to the contents of the books themselves. I receive dozens of books that don't suit my taste—religious tomes, romance novels, and military history to name a few. But I know they appeal to others, and I would never have culled any donations until the day the drop-offs included three books by people whose politics I find vile and dangerous. Without thinking twice, I grabbed them and threw them into a box of stuff we were taking to a resale store. I just couldn't stand the thought of having them in my space. I realize that those authors have a right to their opinions and that people have a right to read them, but I have a right *not* to participate. And every time a similar book lands, it doesn't stay long.

Focusing on the positive doesn't come naturally to me, but in the interest of keeping life in perspective, I keep trying not to let a few segments of library users ruin my day. And that happens when I can give up the griping long enough to focus on the memorable moments. When a young teen trick-or-treater peeked into the library and asked, "I can actually take a book for free?" I felt a little weepy. When a wheelchair-bound octogenarian told me he liked my library because, "Paperbacks are up to *ten bucks now*, you know!" I knew I was making a difference. And when my six-year-old neighbor carefully relocated a volume and told his younger sister that, "The kids' books always go on the *top* shelf," I felt reassured that even little patrons could appreciate rules and standards.

My goal with the library has always been to share my passion for reading with others who understand the joy of turning to a new first page. Yes, the behavior of some people still irks me, but the special moments and the big picture are what count. On any given day, someone can spend three minutes in front of my home and walk away smiling, book in hand—maybe a Harry Bosch adventure, a beloved actor's memoir, or a well-worn copy of a childhood favorite. Each satisfied visitor belongs to a community-wide network of like-minded bookworms who savor the serendipity of finding a (free!) book that sparks their interest. And even a neat and nit-picky librarian has to love being a part of that. ▪

Mary Ellen Collins is a freelance writer whose essays have appeared in publications including *Notre Dame Magazine, The Christian Science Monitor, SASEE, The Writer,* and *Writer's Digest*, and on NextAvenue.org and the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop blog. See her work at authory.com/MaryEllenCollins.