

CULTURE

Little Free Libraries

JANE MUNDY

CHANCES ARE THERE'S

one near you—maybe on your block or in your local park. My Victoria neighbourhood has dozens of little free libraries and there's no stopping them. These freestanding front-yard book exchanges are cute and creative and connect the community: stand by one long enough and guaranteed you'll strike up a conversation with strangers (soon to be friends) over a common interest.

A few blocks from my house I saw a woman stocking her library with children's books. Turns out, we know each other from decades ago and we may have never reconnected but for her library. "Every day, grandparents with toddlers stop by— even more so during the pandemic with schools closed," says Sandy Slobodian.

Four years ago, Slobodian built her little library from a cupboard found on the sidewalk with a "free" sign. After a coat of red paint and a little carpentry, she stocked the shelves and opened for business. "Last year a woman contacted me online wanting to build a library for puzzles and games but couldn't use her place so I suggested she move it next to mine," says Slobodian. "One morning there it was, painted red with recycled cedar shakes. I have never met this woman."

Slobodian posts on Facebook when inventory is low and soon her library is full. "Sometimes boxes of books are left outside my garage door, it's not always "take one and bring one." And there's not much maintenance except when the wind blows," she says, laughing.

Not all libraries are made with free and recycled stuff. Some are elaborate works of art, others whimsical and quirky. "One of my favourites is in Rutledge Park. Its *Lord of the Rings* door almost says to you 'Speak friend, and Enter,'" says Teale Phelps-Bondaroff, volunteer at the Greater Victoria Placemaking Network and Pocket Places Project lead. As for the contents, Phelps-Bondaroff found a Calgary Cow Art book—his parents owned a copy. *How to Knit and Felt with Cat Fur* is the weirdest book he found.

Phelps-Bondaroff maps and counts little free libraries—111 four years ago skyrocketed to 422 by February 2021. Lots popped up during the pandemic. Esther Beauregard and her roommate Ruby registered #400; it was their "Covid-19 project." They created a nautical theme complete with anchors and mounted to spin in the wind and named it "Boats on the Roof."

On McNair Street, "Vincent



LITTLE FREE LIBRARY HISTORY

The "take-a-book, leave-a-book" movement started in Wisconsin. In 2009, Todd Bol built the first Little Free Library as a memorial to his mom. Now little free libraries are found worldwide and Canada is a big fan. Many are registered officially with Little-FreeLibrary.org. As well, a list and interactive map of Little Free Libraries can be found online with victoriaplacemaking.ca.

transformed his library at Halloween into a little free morgue for Barbie dolls, complete with white sheets and toe tags," Phelps-Bondaroff adds. "It morphed into an advent calendar and last time I looked it was a conceptual art piece. Another library is a beautiful big dollhouse nailed to a post—I dropped off a piece of plexiglass."

Not every library is on the map—Phelps-Bondaroff reckons dozens aren't accounted for.

However many there are, nobody has lodged a complaint.

"Anything that gets people to read is wonderful. My kids often visit our little libraries on their way to and from school," says Alyssa Polinsky, director of communications at the Greater Victoria Public Library. "We don't consider them competition—they are a convenient gateway to public libraries because they get kids hooked on reading and learning." ■