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## Do-it-yourself Libraries

In less than five years, people in 55 countries have installed more than 16,000 little libraries in front of homes, schools, and businesses. Don't tell Rotarian Todd Bol, the man behind the movement, that print is supposed to be dead.

When the editors at *Reader's Digest* made a list of the "50 Surprising Reasons We Love America" for their July 2013 cover story, they placed Bruce Springsteen and Jon Bon Jovi at No. 50, Bill Gates at No. 25, and toilet paper at No. 23. Sandwiched between sliced bread and tumbleweeds, at No. 11, was Little Free Library, a homespun-tribute-turned-international-phenomenon started by Rotarian Todd Bol.

People in 55 countries have installed more than 16,000 Lilliputian lending libraries, run on the premise of "take a book, return a book," since Bol built his first in 2009 in memory of his mother, a teacher who loved to read. Called an "international movement" by the *New York Times* and a "global sensation" by the *Huffington Post*, the libraries have garnered coverage from media outlets including Japanese public television and French and Italian fashion magazines.

Participation is simple: Mount a wooden box (many of them look like birdhouses) on a post in front of your home, workplace, or school. Fill it with books. Delight as neighbors stop by to browse your selections or leave books of their own.



Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., USA



Lakki Marwat, Pakistan

Bibliophiles aren't the only ones willing to trade a patch of lawn for a box of books. Bol calls Little Free Library "a new canvas for community groups" – such as artists in New York City, who held a competition to design the boxes; inmates at a Wisconsin prison, who are constructing them as part of vocational training and community service; AARP, which is funding their installation at the homes of isolated elderly people; and corporations, which are building them on service days to give back to their communities. Rotary and Rotaract clubs from the United States to Canada, Mauritius to Ghana, are installing the libraries in their areas too.

Real estate agents report that a Little Free Library can encourage people to buy a home in the surrounding neighborhood, because it signals the kind of community-oriented place they are looking for. Residents in areas devastated by Hurricane Sandy installed the libraries so that even when nothing else worked, they would have books to read. Scientists in Antarctica want to build one at their airport. "The concept of more neighbors meeting than ever before is what keeps us vibrant and keeps us going," Bol says.

About three-quarters of the operators (the organization calls them stewards) build their own libraries; plans are available on the nonprofit's website, [www.littlefreelibrary.org](http://www.littlefreelibrary.org). The rest purchase readymade ones for \$175 and up, depending on the model. The proceeds fund the staff, website, and educational outreach, as well as the organization's programs to build more libraries for people in need.

Bol tinkers with prototypes at the Little Free Library workshop, located in Hudson, Wis. (population 13,187), in a nondescript industrial building next to a granite shop and a medical supply company. He calls one model – painted blue and adorned with tobacco lath he picked up at an auction – the blue shack of tobacco road, after the Johnny and Edgar Winter song. Another has a roof garden, and a third has a paint treatment to mimic stucco found on homes on the East and West coasts.

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Excerpted from March 2014 article in Rotarian Magazine. Read the entire article at:

<http://therotarianmagazine.com/diy-libraries/>