

Little Free Libraries®: the trouble with twee solutions to big problems

The concept of a take a book / leave a book exchange is nothing new. However, since 2009, the Little Free Library® movement has taken hold. As a media darling, this organization has captured the hearts and minds of book lovers the world over. It became a non-profit corporation in 2011 and has continued to grow both in terms of LFL® installations, staff, revenue and brand recognition. Its stated mission is to “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.” Taking a critical eye toward the movement, we will interrogate the outcomes of this mission - are LFL®s really making an impact on communities, or are they simply feel-good projects for the privileged classes? Furthermore, in the age of austerity, are they presenting a reasonable alternative to funding traditional libraries? What does it mean to be a library - are the values espoused within the library community shared by the LFL® steward community?

By analyzing the movement through the lenses of civic crowdfunding, landscape theory, community-led libraries and philanthropic motivation, we will explore the narratives and claims presented by this growing non-profit corporation. How can the enthusiastic support of the movement be harnessed for a robust collaboration between community groups, including public libraries, to make the biggest impact on the people who need it the most? The root causes behind lack of access to books/education and illiteracy - poverty, inequality, and racism - are systemic issues requiring significant and sustained attention from governments, community organizations, educators and citizens alike. A whimsical box of books may be a humble contribution to community building, but the real work of social justice is obfuscated when the impact of such initiatives is overstated.