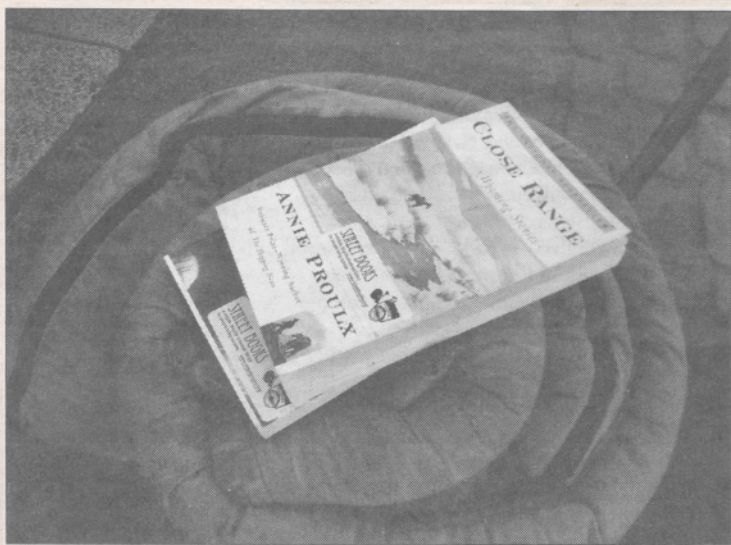




This summer, Portland writer and educator Laura Moulton took it upon herself to bring a mobile library to the streets. Her project captured the attention of not only people experiencing homelessness, but the community at large, people in the media, and a devoted cadre of volunteers. Here, Moulton writes about the journey that became Street Books.

A good read

*Journal of a
street librarian*



PHOTOS BY
BECKY MULLINS

BY LAURA MOULTON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The first week in June, I rolled up to the South Park Blocks at Salmon Street and parked my bicycle-powered mobile library. It was drizzling — June appears to be Portland's new November — as I set the brakes, pulled out the drawer and propped it up. I wiped down the books with a cloth, and took stock of my surroundings. There were guys with backpacks at the north end of the square, sitting together smoking and talking quietly. A group of tattooed kids with dogs on ratty leashes sprawled on the grass not far from me, under what small shelter the canopy of branches above provided. People walked through the square with children, others jogged through with headphones on.

I confess I was a little nervous. I'd written a grant to operate a mobile library for people living outside, and Portland's Regional Arts and Culture Council (racc.org) had agreed to fund it. I found the bicycle, a used Haley Trike (haleytrikes.com) on Craigslist, and my brother James built a beautiful box on it to carry my library books around. I'd chosen the books carefully, from my own shelves and from Second Glance Books on Northeast Sandy Boulevard, where the proprietor Rachelle gave me a big discount when she heard about what I was doing. Now I was ready, but full of trepidation: what if nobody out here wanted a book? Or what if they all checked out books, but, as one naysayer had predicted, no one returned them?

There was also a small voice in me that said, Really? A book? Somebody's been sleeping on a piece of cardboard on the concrete for months, and what you've got to offer them is a paperback? It had occurred to me, for instance, that a man who had been on the road for months or years might not enjoy reading Cormac McCarthy's desolate, lonesome story of an interminable journey

on foot, called "The Road," even if it had won a Pulitzer.

My first patron wasn't actually a patron at all, but a bicycle cop named A.B. He studied my contraption, scanned the titles in the library, and then asked for my permit. I said I thought if I wasn't selling anything, I didn't need to have a permit. He chewed on this information for a few minutes and then seemed to decide I was OK. He lingered and talked about his favorite kind of books, how he had a busy brain and normally only made it partway through a given book before getting distracted. He settled in and appeared quite comfortable, and much as I appreciated the company, I began to wonder if his uniform and presence at the library wasn't going to hurt my business. After a time, he wished me luck and pushed off. But not before he agreed to pose for a picture, which I later posted on the Street Books website.

With A.B. gone, I screwed up my courage and approached the group of young people sprawled on the grass. "Hey guys, I'm operating a library for people who live outside — you should come have a look at the books, if you like." I handed out a Street Books card to each person. Thomas was one of the first from the group to amble over and lean over the row of books to inspect my collection. Up close I saw that he had that kind of blue-green eyes that are spooky beautiful, and his chin and neck were tattooed with designs.

"I'm also willing to take requests, if you have any," I said.

He looked at me with those eyes. "I've been meaning to read 'Cold Mountain,' by Charles Frazier."

Meeting Thomas that first day, and taking his book request, was the best thing that could have happened to me. Whatever I might have supposed about a young man wearing mostly black, with tattoos on his

face and neck, it wasn't that he'd been meaning to read a Civil War novel that has been called an homage to the Odyssey. I decided that very day that if nothing else, I needed to keep my mind open and make no assumptions about what a patron might want to read, or about what they were like.

It only took a few weeks of running the street library to realize that my initial fears were unfounded. The answer to my early questions were: yes, people would come, and they would come back again and again, returning library books when they were finished reading them, and lingering to talk about whether they liked or disliked them, and what they wanted next. I came to enjoy those conversations about books, and I think the feeling was mutual.

Charlie spotted me that first week, biking back to the Mercy Corps Action Center, where I stored the Street Books bicycle for the summer.

"Hello, Sweetheart," he said. "Let's do this. Whatcha got?"

He chose a copy of "The Monkeywrench Gang," by Edward Abbey, and I took a short video of him talking about the significance of the novel in Abbey's writing career, and how it informed environmental activist groups that came after. Charlie helped spread the word about Street Books, and some weeks he brought along a friend to check out books. Nolan liked cowboy stories, and Mark requested stories about champions, about characters who transcended the challenges in their lives to become winners. Like the story of a racehorse, for example.

"Seabiscuit" is a book about a horse judged by the way it looked," Mark said, "but there was a man who saw some capability in that horse, and a light. People didn't recognize the heart that the horse had."

Mark's words were captured in a video by

The author, Laura Moulton (right) signs out a book to a customer of Street Books