

GOOD READ, from page 8

Beth Nakamura from The Oregonian, which was posted along with a great article by Rebecca Koffman. What followed was a lot of great press all summer. Meanwhile, local Portlanders donated paperback books and money toward sponsoring a patron with a requested book, sometimes coming in person to the Street Books library. A group of students from Beaumont Middle School took their old books to Powell's, sold them and got a gift certificate of \$100 for Street Books. Broadway Books, on NE Broadway and 17th, wrote and said they loved Street Books and wanted to help. "We'll start you with a \$50 gift card," they said. "Come get whatever you need."

Assistant Street Librarians Sue Zalokar and Celia Luce offered tactical and moral support, and gave me the occasional day off. Beth Chapman, a former librarian herself, became a regular at the Saturday shift, and often went in search of titles requested by our patrons. Street Books also received visits from librarians at the Multnomah County Library, including one from Geoff Brunk, with Outreach Services, who gave us two boxes of carefully chosen books. It fast became clear that the city of Portland was more than ready to support a library that served its citizens who lived outside.

Good-natured debates and conversations regularly spring up about literature. One day Max, who was sixteen and staying at the Harbor Light Shelter, checked out "A Million Little Pieces," by James Frey. Debra, who was also young, was combing through the library, searching for a book. She saw Max's choice and said "Just so you know, that guy made up a bunch of stuff in his memoir. It's not actually all true."

Max shrugged. "If it's a good story, it doesn't matter so much."

"It does matter," Debra said. "I was totally into it, and only halfway through when I heard he'd made it all up, and it sucked to find that out!"

I listened as two teenagers suddenly engaged in a debate about an author's responsibility when it comes to penning a memoir, the subjectivity of "truth", and the necessity of some invention whenever one is constructing stories from the past. The writing teacher part of me wanted to pump my fist in the air and say, "Yesss!"

Another chance encounter I witnessed happened on a recent Saturday shift in the Park Blocks. A.B. was there, the security guard who once asked to see my permit, and was now a great supporter and defender of the Street Books cause. Also there was Jeffrey, a formerly homeless meth addict, now clean and a student in my writing class at Marylhurst University. Jeffrey gestured to A.B., who was looking through the library books, and said, "That guy used to wake me up in the park next to the elephant, back when I was still using. He was always pretty nice about it."

"Hey A.B.," I waved him over, and repeated what Jeffrey had just said. I told him that Jeffrey was a college student now,

and free of drugs. A kind of success story. "I thought you looked familiar," A.B. said. "Congratulations." He reached out and shook Jeffrey's hand.

Street Books patrons are issued a simple, complimentary library card, no photo ID or proof of address necessary, and after they choose a book, they sign their name on the card, which they leave behind. We leave the date blank, agreeing to find each other the

grows. Road warrior-types with backpacks and dogs on leashes, a bicyclist circling the square, dressed as a jester, hollering "Give the jester a cheeseburger!" In the midst of all the color and vibrancy, our patrons come and go. Each one has a story: Ben looks professorial in his red eyeglasses. He sleeps outside on the ground each night, but can recite Goethe's "Sorrows of a Young Werther" from memory. Most weeks he

Street Roots vendor and Street Books Volunteer Dante (in backward baseball cap) helps out curious visitors to the mobile library.



Street Books invites the public to attend a reception celebrating our successful summer. Meet the patrons, and learn how you can help keep the library going this winter: 6-8 p.m., Monday, Sept. 12, at the Mercy Corps Action Center, 28 SW First Avenue, next to Skidmore Fountain. Find out more at <http://streetbooks.org>

following week, or the week after that. I have found over time that not only are patrons conscientious about returning their books, but they come back to talk to me if, for some reason, they can't return them.

One Saturday, a patron named Dustin approached at the Park Blocks shift and said, "Laura, I have terrible news."

I steeled myself for the possibility that a patron had been hurt or killed.

He took a deep breath. "I totally ruined the copy of 'Hellboy,' the graphic novel you checked out to me."

I wanted to hug him. I told him it was no problem, and that I was happy he'd come back to let me know.

"It got wet in the rain, and the pages are stuck together," he said mournfully. "I just kept thinking about you looking at the 'Hellboy' card and wondering 'Where's Dustin? Where's the 'Hellboy' book?'"

In a city like Portland, each week brings strange and miraculous visions: a kitten perched on an accordion as a young man plays a polka, his case open in front of him in case people feel like throwing in a dollar. A guy named Phil, and his shopping cart that is more a sculpture, sedimentary layers of precious belongings, expertly arranged to use space in the most efficient way possible. On one side, two lilies poking up from a bottle of water. On the other side, a bag of soil out of which a healthy tomato plant

"'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."

checks out murder mysteries or thrillers, saying that he'd go more for highbrow, but he needs something exciting to transport him from his current reality. Pamela has checked out and returned books for most of the summer. She recently had her shopping cart full of possessions taken away by street-cleaners and lost everything — from photos of her children to a book about wolves, given to her by a stranger who read about her on the Street Books Web site.

This summer they have had a chance to share their stories at the Street Books library, meeting others like them, who sleep outside, and plenty of other people of means: students, city workers, bicyclists and artists. It's a great stew of all different types of people. People who live under roofs, people who live under bridges, people who love books, people who write them, and dogs on leashes. So many stories to be told. And plenty of others to check out from the Street Books library.

Look for a Street Books Kickstarter fundraiser project in early September at www.kickstarter.com.


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