

# Clerk helps expand Burmese books at Battle Creek library

By Greyson Steele  
Battle Creek Enquirer

**B**ATTLE CREEK, Mich. (AP)— The shelves at Willard Library feature a plethora of books spanning countless subjects and cultures but until recently there were few Burmese materials available.

A passionate library clerk and a generous author have changed that, the *Battle Creek Enquirer* reports.

Dozens of books and magazines in the Burmese language now adorn the library's shelves, the culmination of a tireless effort by library clerk Par Mawi to serve and better represent Battle Creek's growing Burmese community.

The expanded collection was made possible by Burmese author and publisher Aung Way, a friend of Mawi's who donated several works from his personal collection.

"To see this. It made me cry," Mawi explained, her voice gripped with emotion. "I'm very passionate about this."

Mawi fled her native Myanmar in 2007 due to political violence, enduring three difficult years in a refugee camp before reaching the United States and ultimately settling in Battle Creek more than 10 years ago.

She's worked at Willard Library for about five years and has made it her mission to expand the library's Burmese collection for quite some time.

The recently donated materials are a tremendous source of pride for Mawi and exemplify the library's mission to "create a community of readers and a world of



possibilities."

"We always say the library's for everybody," Willard public relations librarian Kristine Pioch said. "It welcomes everybody that lives here so we have Burmese, we have a Spanish collection, we have a Japanese collection, we have a whole variety of books of all different kinds that are of interest to everybody. We really want to be everybody's library."

Mawi remembers leading Way and other Burmese authors on a tour of the Willard Library in 2019.

Observing collections of Spanish and Japanese literature, the authors wondered, "Do you have a Burmese collection?"

"I was like, 'Yeah, we have some books (about Burma), but not (a) Burmese collection,'" Mawi recalled. "We have more

than 20 books in here, but (they're written) in English."

Mawi asked the authors if they had any suggestions for how to acquire more books in the Burmese language. They agreed to reach out once they returned home to Myanmar.

Shortly after, the coronavirus pandemic took hold of the globe and political unrest in Myanmar further complicated things, Mawi explained.

On February 1, 2021, the military of Myanmar seized control of the government after claiming there were widespread irregularities with voting during the country's November 2020 election.

Opposition to the military takeover sparked further unrest, with the harsh political climate making it increasingly difficult for Burmese authors to get their books published and distributed, according to Mawi.

"A lot of (Burmese) people, we've lost a habit of reading (amid the unrest)," she said. "It makes me really feel sad. When we're not reading, we are more isolated and we have a lack of knowledge, and then we don't know how to communicate anymore."

With odds of acquiring books from

## Murakami plays antiwar songs on radio to protest Ukraine war

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After playing John Lennon's "Imagine" performed by Jack Johnson, Murakami said that the lyrics sounded "pretty optimistic" because they were written in 1971, when "we could still believe in the future, when we still had our ideals."

In closing, Murakami quoted Martin Luther King Jr. as saying in his speech that "Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal." Murakami said that King probably meant that individual rights could be the first to be taken away when the law says so.

He never explicitly mentioned Russia or President Vladimir Putin.

But he noted that many people, frustrated by representative democracy, are drawn closer to authoritarianism. "That might seem efficient, but it's important to remember that if things take a turn in a dark direction, where we end up is truly dangerous, so please be careful."

"I hope there will be some peace in our world."

**REPRESENTATIVE READING.** Par Mawi, a Willard Library clerk who specializes in Burmese outreach, chooses her favorite book from the newly acquired Burmese collection in Battle Creek, Michigan. The shelves at Willard Library feature a plethora of books spanning countless subjects and cultures but until recently there were few Burmese materials available. (Alyssa Keown/Battle Creek Enquirer via AP)

Myanmar growing increasingly slim, Mawi turned to Way, a Burmese author, publisher, and political activist.

Way came to the United States in 2008 and currently resides in Lansing. He's published more than 38 books of poetry and essays and, at the urging of Mawi, decided to donate several works from his personal collection to Willard, including fiction and nonfiction books and magazines.

Many of the books are of poetry, which is often easier to get published in Myanmar because the works are up for interpretation and do not say things directly, according to Mawi.

Myanmar lacks the freedom of press, she said, with written materials often undergoing strict censorship to the point that "all the meaning is gone."

Perusing the variety of Burmese works at Willard recently, Mawi couldn't help but smile.

"All of the books are my favorite," she said. "I actually want to check out all of them."

As a library clerk specializing in Burmese outreach, Mawi also recognizes the tremendous value in having her culture represented on the shelves.

"When we move to another country, when we have to adopt another country as our country, there's so many things that we have to deal with," she said, acknowledging that while local Burmese immigrants are aware of Willard Library, many have often been hesitant to come in because they can't speak English.

She believes the presence of Burmese books on the shelves provides a level of comfort.

"This is just a start," she said.

## Hope, hard reality mix in Japanese town wrecked by disaster

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improve the environment so people want to return, mayor Shiro Izawa said. "We can do it if we don't give up."

### Atsuko Yamamoto

Atsuko Yamamoto, 50, runs a Penguin fast-food store at a food court in the Futaba business community center, but she commutes from another Fukushima town.

"I've always thought I have to do something for (Futaba's recovery), so I raised my hand" when she saw the offer of a space in the food court, which opened two years ago, the former resident says. "When I evacuated, I never imagined I could return to Futaba like this."

Despite her deep attachment to her hometown, living here isn't possible, she says. The only way to make her business work is to get her food supplies in Iwaki, a business hub for coastal Fukushima where she now lives, and then to commute about 40 miles to Futaba.

Her mother used to sell donuts and hamburgers from a stand near the train station, and it was a popular hangout for local students and a landmark remembered by Futaba people before the disaster.

"As Futaba rapidly transforms into an unfamiliar place, I hope this store helps former residents feel at home," Yamamoto says. Familiar buildings and houses are increasingly being torn down, and daytime visitors are predominantly new faces.

"In our view, the buildings that remind us of our hometown are disappearing, like my friends' old houses, and it's extremely sad," she said, holding back her tears. She says she cannot help driving by where demolished houses, including her own, once were, as if to feel the pain and remember the past.

"It's hard to explain," Yamamoto says. "So I hope people will come back to visit and actually see this place."

### Takumi Yamada

Takumi Yamada, a worker at Futaba's only hotel, which opened last May, is from nearby Namie town.

Yamada, 23, spent most of his teenage years outside of Namie after fleeing from his elementary school — while still wearing his indoor classroom shoes — to Saitama, near Tokyo, with his parents and two siblings.

After studying elsewhere in Fukushima and Tokyo, Yamada decided to return home to reconnect and learn about an area he hardly remembered.

Yamada said he was thrilled when he was working on the hotel's reception desk and overheard former residents talking about the whereabouts of mutual friends.

"I think it's great if this hotel becomes a meeting place for former residents," Yamada said. "If there are people wondering whether to return, I think it's best to see the situation for themselves."

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