

OP-ED

The Book Thing's miracle

By Patricia Schultheis

Baltimore Sun

•

Mar 11, 2016 at 11:18 am

I was stunned to open my newspaper recently and read that a devastating fire has nearly [destroyed The Book Thing](#). Tucked away on tiny Vineyard Lane between Greenmount and Abell avenues, The Book Thing has been a Baltimore institution since the late 1990s, when a bartender named Russell Wattenberg founded it. Moved by the plight of students too poor to buy books, Mr. Wattenberg began to collect and give them away.

A headline on the article identifies The Book Thing as an exchange, but that's not exactly correct. "Exchange" implies a trade, a swap, a quid pro quo, an "I'll-Give-You-This-for-That." The Book Thing never asked for a "that." With the atmosphere of an all-night diner giving away free coffee during a snowstorm, its generosity flowed one way. You want this book? Take it. You want this one, too? It's yours. Whether your desire was for a single slim Golden Book, or an armload of hard-covered classics, The Book Thing never asked for anything in return. The only caveat came stamped on each volume's inside cover: "Not for resale. This is a free book. The Book Thing, Baltimore, Maryland."



Top Stories00:1301:12









Maryland Congressman Jamie Raskin reveals cancer diagnosis

One summer Saturday morning I took a minister there. The minister was new to Baltimore, and I thought the experience would help her understand Baltimore's charming quirkiness. Also, to my mind, The Book Thing represented two strands of this city's culture: its history as the home of major literary figures and its no-questions-asked spirit. (The Book Thing has no clerks or librarians to raise an eyebrow when you set aside William James' Varieties of "Religious Experience" to pick up "Fifty Fun Things to Do with Rum.")

But, despite that minister's degrees from Stanford and Princeton Theological Seminary, I'm not certain she quite comprehended the minor miracle she was witnessing. How a tacit communion was transpiring — Take a book. Nourish your mind. Restore your soul.

While some people stooped over bins of workbooks and others perused shelves of cookbooks and philosophy, she kept asking "But where do they get them? If they're just giving books away, where do they get more?" She couldn't compute a quo without a quid.

I don't know what I told her that morning, but now I know how I should have answered: "Trust." Russell Wattenberg and his volunteers simply trusted that other books would be donated to replace the ones going out the door.

Naive? Not if you know Baltimore, hon. The heart of this city thrums with a faintly anarchic spirit. We don't do too well with authority, preferring to conduct our transactions unmediated by regulation and restraint. Mr. Wattenberg understood

Baltimoreans well enough to know they'd respond to his notion of free books by endlessly replenishing his supply. And for nearly 20 years the system worked. Until the morning of March 2nd and the fire.

Pictures show shelf after shelf of charred, soggy books — damage so devastating that it's doubtful how many of the estimated 200,000 volumes are salvageable. Mr. Wattenberg has more stored elsewhere, however, so replacement books are not his major problem. On the contrary, he's asking people not to donate any until he knows where to put them. His more immediate issues concern insurance and rebuilding, complicated questions for a bartender who had the simple dream of giving away books to poor children.

Meanwhile, Baltimoreans are doing what they do best: pitching in. The Book Thing website is accepting donations, and an independent [GoFundMe site](#) has surpassed its \$10,000 goal. Plus, the Abell Improvement Association held a fundraiser at the Peabody Brewery last week. All these will help, I'm sure, but will they be enough?

I hope Baltimore's literary community steps up and does its part as well. From Edgar Allan Poe to today's astounding Ta-Nehisi Coates, Baltimore has fostered amazing writers. Writers who have changed how we think about literature and about ourselves. Writers whose influence extends from Hollywood to the White House

It's on tiny Vineyard Lane, however, I hope they'll focus their attention today. No great writer ever became a great writer without first being a great reader. And right now somewhere in Baltimore, a future great writer is waiting for a free book. One to spark her imagination. Or fire her creativity. One that will be hers once The Book Thing reopens, as I trust it will.

Patricia Schultheis is a writer living in Baltimore. Her most recent book is "St. Bart's Way." Her email is bpschult@yahoo.com.

-
-
-