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TRAVEL THE RADAR

# How libraries are writing a new chapter during the pandemic

Read about book bikes, bibliophile hotels, outdoor story times, and other ways libraries are reacting to COVID-19.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Americans' love affair with libraries has only grown during the pandemic—and so has their book borrowing. According to OverDrive, which libraries use to loan out digital material, weekly e-book lending across the United States has increased nearly 50 percent since March 9, even as some libraries remain physically closed.

Libraries today not only provide free access to books, they also serve as contemporary community centers with shelter from the elements, accessible looos, and—usually—free Wi-Fi. “You don’t have to be a book lover or a reader to enjoy libraries today,” says Richard Reyes-Gavilan, the executive director of Washington, D.C.’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, which reopens September 24 after a three-year, \$211 million renovation.

The landmark 1972 building by modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe saw its blocky glass and steel exterior renovated; its formerly dark and dingy interior was reimagined with a monumental, curving staircase, a roof terrace, and a light-filled, two-story reading room with a digital ceiling collage. Still there: an original interior mural with scenes from King’s life.

Like many contemporary libraries, MLK now stylishly balances stacks of reading materials with creative, civic-minded spaces such as a dance studio, cafe, and workroom equipped with 3-D printers and sewing machines. “It’s a dignified, optimistic, and joyful space where people will want to spend time,” says Reyes-Gavilan.

Here’s a roundup of how libraries and other bookish organizations are helping both locals and travelers read out the pandemic this fall.

## Library architecture’s new chapter

Once upon a time, libraries were meant to be mere book repositories, says Peter Bolek, president and director of design at HBM Architects, which specializes in libraries. “They were buildings that housed materials,” he says. “No great natural light, no comfortable spots, no programming or social activities.”

But in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as community needs changed, libraries morphed into architectural marvels and gathering places. Take Toledo, Ohio's 2016 King Road Branch, which Bolek's firm conceived as a dazzling, modernist mini-pavilion with floor-to-ceiling windows and a free-flowing, bookstore-like interior.

Other newish and notable libraries also combine good design and great reads. Completed in 2018, the South Central Regional Library in Louisville, Kentucky, won an American Architectural Award for its innovative trapezoidal form, clad in gleaming steel and situated in a century-old forest.

Jumbo, puzzle piece-shaped windows with views of midtown Manhattan headline on the Hunters Point Library, which debuted in Long Island City, New York in 2019. The blocky cement structure by star architect Steven Holl has won praise for its ingenious interior bookshelf stairway, though it also netted complaints (and at least one lawsuit) from disability advocates since it has just one elevator.

In Oslo, Norway, the Deichman Bjørvika central library opened in 2020 on the city's main fjord, showing off dramatically cantilevered top levels and angled interior spaces meant for gamers, musicians, and readers.

## Book festivals go virtual

Author readings and other literary happenings have mostly gone online during the pandemic. The world's largest library—Washington, D.C.'s Library of Congress—will hold its 20th annual National Book Festival virtually from September 25 to 27. The festivities include on-demand videos and live author chats from more than 120 writers, poets, and illustrators, including Colson Whitehead, Madeleine Albright, and D.C.'s own Jason Reynolds. It'll focus on timely themes such as Black voices and 21st-century democracies.

The annual Los Angeles Festival of Books, Stories & Ideas zooms online this year with readings and author talks October 18 through November 14. Headliners include Viet Thanh Nguyen, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Sympathizer*.

## Walking, but with words

Strolling down the street with your nose in a book can be a physical challenge (don't trip during that thriller's denouement!). StoryWalk makes it possible to walk and read at the same time by posting laminated, sequential pages from picture books along half-mile stretches in neighborhoods around the U.S. and in a dozen other countries.

So far, thousands of kid's books have gone up on tree trunks in city parks, in store windows, or on stakes along sidewalks. It's been particularly popular with public libraries during the pandemic, says founder Anne Ferguson, who developed the program in collaboration with Montpelier, Vermont's Kellogg-Hubbard Library. "Libraries are saying, "This is what we need—something outdoors, a safe distance apart." Some erect a StoryWalk for a day or two, others for a week or two; a few have children produce their own tales.

## Books on two—or three—wheels

Think of book bikes as the eco-friendly offspring of an old-fashioned bookmobile and a mobile library. The bikes—or trikes—look a little like ice-cream carts, but they deliver novels, picture books, and biographies, not bonbons. The rolling repositories include the Seattle Public Library's fleet of three bike trailers and the Paperback Rider, an ambulatory Little Free Library in La Crosse, Wisconsin, that gave away 980 tomes in 2019.

Each Icicle Tricycle custom book trike has shelves that can hold more than 150 books. Made in Portland, Oregon, they've rolled into Canada for the Yukon Literacy Coalition and Western Michigan for Reading Now Network events focused on early literacy. "The book bike is a smaller scale than a big bookmobile, and more approachable," says creator Ryan Icicle. "They're getting into communities that may not have library services."

Last year, the Scottsdale, Arizona Public Library got its own, uniquely Wild West-themed delivery vehicle: a Pedal Positive book bike

gussied up to resemble a covered wagon.

*(Related: Is this the world's most beautiful bookstore?)*

## Bedtime stories

Reading in bed takes on a new meaning if you spend the night in Aarhus, Denmark's new BOOK1, a design-minded hostel opening this fall in the city's former main library. The creators kept the 1934 building's vintage stairways, installed ceiling lights resembling old library lamps, and riffed on the structure's red brick exterior with rust-hued cement interior walls in its Pod Dorms (bunk rooms).

The Hotel Bennett debuted last year on the site of the former main Charleston, South Carolina library. Though the utilitarian 1960 book depository was torn down, the plush new hotel incorporates pink marble from its exterior into its egg-shaped bar and the built-in bookshelves in its 179 guest rooms hold a total of 13,805 hardbacks for guests to read during their stays.

## From page to podcast

Bookmark these public library podcasts for inspiration on what to read next. The New York Public Library's biweekly *The Librarian Is In* alternates between freeform interchanges about new titles and a more traditional book club. And the British Library's *Anything But Silent* podcast chats up authors (e.g. Simon Doonan, Samra Habib) and explores literary news such as the university professor who is turning classics like *Treasure Island* into video games to encourage kids to read.

## Books in a box

Pay a small fee every month, and you can receive a subscription box of pet goods, beauty products, or different kinds of bacons. Several libraries are doing it too, now sending out their own—free—boxes of reading materials. The Eisenhower Public Library in Harwood Heights, Illinois mails teenage patrons a "Ya'll Read" care package with a book and related goodies; the Nacogdoches Public Library in Texas packs up theme boxes stuffed with books, materials for DIY projects, and suggestions on what to read next.

Subscribe to the quarterly Call Number book box (\$35 each; \$136 annually) to receive novels and non-fiction titles by up-and-coming Black authors. The service is curated by Jamillah Gabriel, a longtime librarian. "I stumbled across a children's book box for my niece, but I couldn't find anything with Black literature for adults," she says. "I'm able to find authors who are not mainstream." Past offerings have included *The Secret Women*, Sheila Williams's novel about a trio of friends united by loss; and *This Is Major: Notes on Diana Ross, Dark Girls, and Being Dope*, Shayla Lawson's essays on dating, "Black girl magic," and confronting racism in the workplace.

## Crazy deals on library services!

In his former career as an actor, Barbara Bush Branch Library employee John Schaffer portrayed a reporter on *The West Wing* and a drooling patient on *E.R.* These days, he's back in front of the camera playing Curbside Larry, a cowboy-hatted, crazy-eyed character in videos hawking services at the suburban Houston, Texas, library.

"What's all this cost? Just three low payments of zero, zero, zero dollars! It's crazy how much you get for free!" Schaffer crows, emulating a cheesy used car salesman as he talks curbside book pickups and digital library cards. "There are bad, low-budget local TV commercials in every big city," he says. "All those guys were the inspiration for Larry."

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