

Neighborhood 'libraries' a growing phenomenon

By Robert Samuels, Washington Post

Philip Vahab loves it when strangers wander to the odd, wooden box outside his Northwest Washington rowhouse. Is it a birdhouse? Is it a fancy mailbox? Some ornamental, neighborhood talking point?

No. No. And kind of. The box is stuffed with paperbacks from Dean Koontz and Don DeLillo, free for the taking. Borrowers can return them – if they want – or trade them for a different book. At first blush, it might seem quaint. But the book house is a part of a burgeoning global literary movement just now taking root in the region.

The “Little Free Library” concept started four years ago in the Midwest, when an entrepreneur named Todd Bol watched his neighbors gobble up books placed outside his home. Back then, he dreamed that 2,500 similar libraries would be constructed by 2014. He was naive. There are already more than 10,000.

In the District, the first recorded little library belongs to Vahab. He built it in January, thinking it might be an interesting experiment for the Meridian Hill neighborhood.

He purchased a small, wooden model of a house on the Web, stained it and hoisted it onto a pole. He staked it amid the lush, little garden he had created in a swale near the edge of his front yard. Then he set down small red blocks, like crumbs in the woods, to lead pedestrians down the sidewalk to the library.

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