

Courtney Hollender

The Book Man

In his introduction to *Life Stories*, a collection of *New Yorker Profiles*, David Remnick confesses that "the Profile is a terribly hard form to get right." Conceived as a form to describe Manhattan celebrities, the genre now travels widely and along all emotional and occupational registers. One quality runs through many of the best Profiles, though, notes Remnick: a sense of obsession. "The Book Man" is one student's foray into the genre of the Profile. It was written in an "Introduction to Creative Nonfiction" course and is based on her service-learning experiences for which she earned an optional fourth credit.

I cut through the alleyway and down the brick steps, through a maze of well-worn cardboard boxes full of hardcover pop-fiction, old yearbooks, and trashy romance novels, to poke my head through the reinforced wood door. Nailed to this door at a slight tilt, a white plastic sign reads The Book Thing of Baltimore, Inc., FREE BOOKS. On a ledge above the door, resting like stained glass saints above a church portal, sits a portrait of two anonymous smiling children in a 9 x 5" wooden frame. This photo is one of my favorite donations. Continuing inside the row house basement, I enter a colony of books. They are piled floor to ceiling, leaning against the yellow and blue painted brick walls, and spilling from the makeshift wooden shelves. Peering past books and oddities, I search for the proprietor, ex-bartender and Ithaca College alum Russell Wattenberg.

When he's not rearranging boxes, or joking around with young kids, he sits, right foot resting on left knee, upon his throne: a thinly padded, dusty brown plastic rolling office chair. The chair is wedged into a corner to the left of the door, up against the wall, in front of a table supporting an outdated computer, a printer, an ancient T.V. set, and messy stacks of books that are either too racy for the shelves or have been put aside for a friend. Moguls of boxes stuffed with more books, random power tools, and paper towels trap him in from the remaining sides. A lit Marlboro cigarette either rests between his fingertips or burns from the overflowing ashtray beneath his monitor. And a good half-dozen empty silver Diet Coke® cans litter the edges of his desk. A little off to the right, bolted to a wooden ceiling beam, hangs a small black AM/FM radio from the '70s. It's set to the classic rock station. Closer to the door, his old New York

license plate is fixed to another beam, near the taped up cover of some Stephen King novel.

Russell is dressed in his daily fatigues: big baggy black cargo pants and a dark tee shirt with "The Book Thing Of Baltimore, Inc." screened in white writing on the front, and the triangular recycle logo with the image of a book in its center on the back. And of course, his dirty, beaten up black mesh Jack Daniels baseball cap crowns his sweaty forehead and shaggy black hair. As I continue to take in his image, I see his shoelaces are loosened, and the tongues of his black hiking boots are pulled down towards his toes. His thick black beard and moustache, like his hair, could use a slight trim.

I approach, and greet him with my usual "What's up?" He replies with his token response that goes something like "Up? It's a preposition; the opposite of down; the last two letters of the word ketchup; P U spelled backwards; etc..." I typically retort, "Yeah, okay, whatever, first time I heard that Mr. Clean had hair," and then he engulfs me with a tremendous hug until my feet are long off the ground and I start to make wheezing noises.

If one weekend someone randomly stumbled upon the wooden sign resting on the 27th Street sidewalk with "Free Books" painted above a large black arrow aimed at the steps of the Book Thing, they would probably walk over and investigate. Russell, leaning against the blue wooden off-hours book drop bin, would see their inquiring eyes, and with a hint of delight, would give a well-rehearsed welcome. It might sound something like "Welcome to The Book Thing, all the books are free, we encourage greed, take as many as you like, the only condition is that before you leave you count how many books you take, and stamp them 'Not for Resale'. Go have a look around. There are about a quarter of a million books inside, so I'm sure you'll find something you like. And if you need help, ask." This spiel varies slightly from time to time, depending upon Russell's energy level, but that's the basic format. Further questioning might warrant other generic responses such as "Yes, we'll take anything you want to give us, including magazines. You can bring books over during our hours of operation, which are nine to six on Saturday and Sunday, or drop them off in the drop-box after hours. We're supported by various grants, individual gifts, and the sale of valuable donated books. If you want, you can come by to volunteer on Wednesdays from three to ten, and help shelve." Then, having greeted and informed his new patron, Russell would resume his job sorting through the dozens of freshly donated stacks from the concrete landing at the bottom of the steps.

Operating for the past six years as a non-profit organization, The Book Thing gives away about 20,000 books each week to approximately 1,000

Baltimore area residents. The idea for the Book Thing was born – over beer – when Russell was tending bar at Dougherty’s Pub. On Friday afternoons, a group of teachers gathered regularly at the bar and griped about the shortage of libraries and books in Baltimore City Public Schools. Moved by the teachers’ stories, Russell emptied his tip jar one day and went garage-sale shopping, returning with nearly 300 books. The next time the teachers came in for a beer, he tossed them the keys to his van and told them to take what they wanted.

Today, the people who come by to pick books up are from all different economic backgrounds and age groups. They also come for all different reasons. Many public school teachers frequent The Book Thing in search of books for their classes. Some of the other regulars include a large number of kids, with a parent in tow, looking for books that they can read together. Several people have come in to The Book Thing and boxed up books to ship to book-needy countries, including the Philippines, Laos, and Malawi.

There’s a 150,000 book per person per day limit at The Book Thing, but I don’t think anyone has reached it yet. On my first visit, a friend and I left with a total of 73 books, and we were ridiculed as “illiterate lightweights!” If you ever plan on leaving with only one or two books, think twice. Russell will walk up to you like a Jewish grandmother, and say “What! Is that all you’re taking?” Like a bizzaro-bouncer, Russell prevents people from leaving with fewer books than they can carry. It isn’t uncommon to hear him bellow something like “We encourage greed, people!” and “You don’t have enough books in your hands!” To push his inventory even more, he frequently offers half-off sales. Notably, his generosity doesn’t end with The Book Thing’s visitors; he is also habitually giving raises to the volunteers.

In addition to their liberal salaries, the volunteers are bequeathed with the benefit of constant hydration. A red plastic cooler sits beside the door to The Book Thing. It’s full of bottled water, Diet Coke®, and really obscurely named entirely artificially flavored generic soft drinks from Save-A-Lot®. There’s lemon-lime Crisp®, Tubz® root beer, grape flavored Bunch®, and my favorite, strawberry Patch®.

Once it hits about six/six thirty on Wednesday, one of the most important decisions of the week is made: what’s for dinner. Wednesday is volunteer night, and between three and ten pm about a dozen people ritually suspend their lives to shelve books and eat pizza. (I think they order Chinese, occasionally, but I’ve never been around one of those days. I’ve only seen evidence from napkins or the backs of envelopes bearing hash marks under the words Chow Mein and General Tso.) Anyway, early evening, when the proposition of pizza is in the air, the pizza survey is taken, and the troops can choose between meat or feta. Russell, like Oscar the Grouch (whom he often resembles come bill time),

prefers his pizza with sardines. But, unless the other osteichthyes-loving volunteers are present, he votes for meat.

How to Enjoy Sex While Conscious, is just one of the many strange books that turn up in the place. It won the 2nd Strangest Title award on the Book Thing's website, www.bookthing.org. Other winning titles include *Psychological Effects of Preventing Nuclear War*, *How to Read A Book*, and the *Alien Abductee's Handbook*. Aside from the many bizarre titles, some of the quirky charm of the inventory has to do with the numbers of certain books that turn up. For instance, during the Baltimore Book Festival, there must have been several hundred copies of L. Ron Hubbard books floating around. Likewise, there's little demand for Wayne Dwyer's *The Erroneous Zones*. That particular book gets picked up very often because its title is usually misread as *The Erogeous Zones*, but I don't know anyone, other than myself, who has actually ever left with a copy. Other abundances include a handful of the poorly edited autobiography entitled *The How-to Guidebook on Erotic Dancing*, but those copies went a lot faster than Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth*.

Peculiar objects and knickknacks also find their way into the boxes that are dropped off. I've collected photographs, business cards, used postcards, and an iron-on Lee Riders patch all used as bookmarks. Also, reading glasses, photo albums, toys, games, old vinyl records, magnets, and ladies' leather wallets have popped up at some time or another.

At the three-day long annual Baltimore Book Festival, Russell fills and refills three tents with books. Ever so naturally he shouts "Free books! Free books, people! There's a 150,000 book limit per person per day, but they're all free!" Occasionally, when he tires of that call, he'll recite anything out loud, really loudly, with the hope of drawing attention. My least favorite, but his most frequent, was his recitation of the alphabet in a horribly annoying booming voice. Other choices, which were more agreeable to my ears, included recitations of random passages from romance novels and bad fiction. There's something really beautiful about people who happily make fools out of themselves for a noble cause.

Courtney Hollender, an avid musician who studies guitar, drums and bass, will graduate from Goucher College with a degree in Biology in May 2003. Although she was a senior before she took her first writing class, her explorations of Creative Nonfiction have led her to pursue writing more seriously. As part of her work at The Book Thing, she wrote and secured a \$5000 grant for the organization.