

The Library of Little Books

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A.E. Newton Book Collection Competition



The Library of Little Books: Essay

For as long as I can remember, I've been known to loved ones as a nick-nack collector. I'm not sure if it was an identity assigned to me by my gift giving family or decided by my love of rummaging through discarded materials to save and use for crafting, but by middle school, I'd decided to lean into this character. No matter where I've lived, I've always dedicated a shelf (or two) in my room to my treasures. Both at home and in my dorms at school, there's always a surface filled with an assortment of milk carton tabs, dried leaves, small rocks, fidget toys, and more. As it's grown over the years, one of my shelves has become dedicated to my library of little books.

These books have come to me in a myriad of ways; the most popular being Little Free Libraries and book giveaways, as these tend to be spots where I find the most unexpected things. Lately, friends and family have started gifting me books specifically picked out for my shelf. I started acquiring these books as far back as elementary school, and for the first few years, without even realizing it. Although it started as an afterthought, this collection has become a really meaningful way to remember travels and connect with friends. At the surface this is a collection of something tangible, but it's also an accumulation of tales from my life hidden in the journeys of how each book got to me.

So how do I define my 'little books'? To start, they're physically small. On average, they range between the size of a matchbox to a couple of CD cases stacked on top of each other and come in a variety of rectangular shapes. This means they're easily transportable and can be carried in my bag to make a stressful day sillier. They also tend to rely on visual representations like graphics or color more than paragraphs like a novel does, making them easier to digest in a short amount of time for a wide variety of audiences. The books' content varies from comedic to educational to simply pleasing to the eye, and are all unique in topic save for *All My Friends Are Dead* and its sequel, *All My Friends Are Still Dead* by Avery Monsen and Jory John. In terms of their purpose, I envision that these books are destined to live on coffee tables. Their colorful covers, consumable size, and often humorous tone are perfect conversation starters, whether talking about the book itself or how I got it.

Though they may appear to be lower in reading level, these are not children's books. Some are lighthearted and suitable for young eyes, but others reference heavier and more complex subjects, even if jokingly. For example, *The Book of Bunny Suicides* by Andy Riley and *Henri, Le Chat Noir* by William Braden discuss mental health and famous philosophers. Meanwhile, *Notes from a Public Typewriter* by Michael Gustafson and Oliver Uberti or *Strange Planet* by Nathan W. Pyle, are compilations of more innocent topics like anonymous messages from the public or alien themed newspaper comics. Largely, however, these books are accessible to all due to their spreads of simple drawings and colorful images.

As I mentioned, the beauty of this collection is that each book comes with a story and I imagine my instinct to collect them stemmed from my love of storytelling. Since I was little, I've loved to listen to my grandparents tell tales of their childhood or explain the lore behind family heirlooms. Over the last few years, my grandparents have started to struggle with their memories, so I've made it a point to sit and converse more intentionally with them, hoping to preserve as many words as possible for future generations. Amongst my siblings and cousins, I've come to be known as the family recordkeeper, being entrusted with letters, slides, and other evidence of my family's past. Someday, I hope to hand these books down alongside other treasured family nick-nacks. For the time being, this still-growing collection of little books sits on display in my room for the passerby's pleasure, and I cannot wait to share this longtime part of myself with you.

Anglund, Joan Walsh. *Love is a Special Way of Feeling*. New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1999.

My grandma, whom we call ‘Honey’, is who I credit for my love of collecting. Though its faded pink cover indicates that it’s a lot older, she picked this book up at a garage sale just a few years ago. When she gifted it to me, she explained that she chose it because she thought I’d like the drawings and that it smells like old books. The hand drawn images are, in fact, beautiful and the pages waft the scent of a creaky and crowded bookstore. This is one of the books in my collection intended for a younger audience, but as Honey explained, it shares a message about what it feels like to love and be loved, which is relevant throughout one’s entire life, and is thus suitable for and all to enjoy.

Benson, Richard. *F this Test: Even More of the Very Best Totally Wrong Test Answers*. San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2014.

I’m not sure how this book came into my possession, but I’ve held onto it because I think it’s an incredibly creative concept to be published. Benson explains in the introduction that these are all real wrong answers from stumped students who didn’t want to leave answers blank on tests. Their responses are entertaining because, although they are not the answer the teacher was looking for, they are quite clever. For example, to the question , “What is the overall message of *Frankenstein*?”, someone responded “Don’t reanimate corpses”. I believe that handwriting is one of the many ways to express your personality, so I love that not only did Benson include their words (and drawings) verbatim, but that he lifted and printed the student’s handwriting. This authentic presentation combined with the genius of students who felt stuck and silly makes for an overall very visually interesting read.

Braden, William. *Henri, Le Chat Noir: The Existential Musings of an Angst-Filled Cat*. Clarkson Potter/Ten Speed, 2013.

I picked up this book from a Little Free Library in downtown Detroit over a weekend when my family saw the Hamilton musical during its 2019 national tour. What first caught my eye was the name, as we’d adopted a little black cat of our own just a couple of weeks before. Though *Henri, Le Chat Noir* may appear to be meant for children, upon reading it you’ll find that it talks about the teachings of famous philosophers and emotions that only a teenager on Tumblr during 2012 could explain. This book draws its audience through pages and pages of adorable photos of Henry the cat. Even while captioning these photos with all of his cat’s innermost thoughts, Braden allowed Henry to keep some of his mystery by removing all color and styling this book in black and white. This decision also perfectly adds to the dramatics of the housecat we are meeting. I believe that the contributions of this book to my collection are self explanatory.

Erskine, Jim, and George Moran. *Throw a Tomato: And 151 Other Ways to be Mean and Nasty.*
New York, C.N. Potter, 1979.

I was gifted this book by the owners of a cafe I grew up working at as a parting gift when I left for college. During slow moments, I'd grab this inconspicuous looking book off the shelf and imagine using some of these suggestions on customers who'd been particularly rude before they'd had their morning joe. A few things I keep up my sleeve for the future include slobbering on the couch, squirting water through my teeth, and sneaking up on people. It's not that I'd recommend ever doing all, or even some, of the things listed in this book, but they're definitely a fun way to think about dealing with a situation. For never failing to make me smile when I come home upset after a long day and for inspiring the most mischievous of revenge plots during late night gossip sessions with friends, this book is guaranteed a spot in this collection.

Gustafson, Michael, and Oliver Uberti, editors. *Notes from a Public Typewriter.* New York, Grand Central Publishing, 2018.

In downtown Ann Arbor, there's a lovely independent bookstore called Literati, where, in the basement sits a little stool, sheets of blank paper, and a typewriter for the public to type out messages as they pass through. Since the bookstore opened in 2013, my family has loved supporting the local business, and whenever we make weekend stops for stories, it is routine to step downstairs and read whatever new messages have been typed by passersby and taped to the 'wall of fame'. Many of the books on my shelves, including this one, were picked up from this green building on the corner. This little red book contains a collection of the musings of children and adults alike, and gives a taste of my hometown to those who choose to pick it up. I tend to flip through this book when I'm feeling homesick or am craving an uplifting reminder that the world is full of so many wonderful, thoughtful, and creative people.

Johnson, Mia, and Blanca Gómez. *From Rain to Rainbows.* San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2015.

This book is full of phrases and illustrations about rain and rainbows that one might find scrolling through Pinterest. I first encountered it at a high school friend's house, where I'd flip through its colorful pages every time I visited. I've copied many of the drawings into my journal, tracing them using Crayola pipsqueak markers to ensure they matched the spectrum of the book. Lo and behold, my appreciation did not go unnoticed. When our group of friends exchanged Secret Santa gifts later that year, I unwrapped my own copy of the book that had my favorite pages pre-marked by my friend with rain/rainbow inspired bookmarks. My all-time favorite page holds a doodle of a rainbow with legs riding on a skateboard. The caption reads, "When you come across a rainbow riding on a skateboard, it's probably going to be a pretty good day." -Marc Johns" (Johnson & Gómez, 91). I appreciate this book's

optimistic attitude towards the often-disliked, dreary weather, because as the saying goes, you'd never see rainbows without a bit of rain.

Pilobolus. *Twisted Yoga*. New York, Chronicle Books, 2002.

Pilobolus is a nonprofit acrobatic dance group that tours the country to share their unique style of modern dance. In 2012, my family went to see their performance in my hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan with no idea what to expect. I was only nine at the time, but I remember being in awe of how their show was an incredible display of patience, strength, creativity, and connection. I also recall watching them and feeling the same way I sometimes do about abstract art, thinking that so much of their movement seemed like something I could do at home. However, after buying their book and trying to recreate some of their poses, I've really come to respect the cooperation, trust, and training that it takes to practice this art. The figures in this book never fail to amaze me, and their serenity is a beautiful addition to some of the other more chaotic books in this collection.

Kay, Sarah. B: "If I Should Have a Daughter..." Hachette Books, 2015.

This book is the lyrics and illustration of the spoken word poem performed by the poet Sarah Kay in 2011 at the TED Conference in Long Beach, California. I first heard this poem when my family was living in a predominately white town in Ohio, and I remember Sarah Kay's TED talk being the first time I saw my 'wasian' identity, specifically half-Japanese and half-American, represented in the media. Growing up with a lot of personal and cultural insecurities, many of the messages of standing up for yourself and leaning on your community that Kay spoke of in the poem really resonated with me. In middle school, I very loudly endeavored to memorize this poem, and was gifted this book by my parents to help me practice. Today, I can still recite most of it by heart, and lines like, "this world is made out of sugar: it can crumble so easily, but don't be afraid to stick your tongue out and taste it." (Kay, 31) stay with me while I'm going about my daily life.

Lang, Gregory E. *Why a Daughter Needs a Mom: 100 Reasons*. Cumberland House, 2004.

This book, measuring in at a whopping 8 ¼ inch by 7 ¼ inch by ½ inch, borders on what I generally allow to be considered a 'little book'. However, as this was the book that started my little book collection, I made an exception. It is written in a list format, and each page includes a stock photo of a heartwarming mother and daughter pair. I am a middle child, the only daughter between two brothers. When I was little and struggled with feeling left out my mom gave me this book as a reminder that she'd always be there for me. The scattered annotations, written in purple (her favorite color), that she left in

the margins make this book all the more special to me, and will always be a part of this collection for being very near and dear to my heart.

"Max does this mean we're engaged?" Alexander Hamilton Co., 1965.

I found this book at a book sale on Beaver Island in Lake Michigan back in middle school, and will admit that I did not entirely understand its topic at first. I was drawn in by its cherry red cover which indicated that it only cost \$1 at its time of creation in 1965; a dollar for a new book is unheard of today. Only after revisiting it years later did I realize that my mom's initial disapproval was understandable because her early teenage daughter had come home carrying a book of sex jokes, claiming that she only liked it because of its cover. Now, I really appreciate how visually unusual this entire book is. The jokes are simply made, using pairs of intentionally placed footprints and a corresponding speech bubble drawn on each page. In addition, the pages are inked entirely black and use the blank white negative space to depict the text and images, creating scenes that match the mood of the humor. To this day, there are still some jokes I don't quite understand and am excited to see how my relationship with the text continues to change as I get older.

Mencini, Gianandrea, and Graziano Arci. *When Venice Floods*. Translated by David Graham, Venice, lineadacqua, 2014.

I found this book in a Little Free Library on a late night walk through the neighborhoods surrounding Swarthmore College. I found it during finals my sophomore year, just after I'd finished the environmental studies introductory course and declared it my major. I love this book for the window it provides into a lifestyle with which I am entirely unfamiliar. I grew up surrounded by the Great Lakes, but have always been intimidated by the power of water. Seeing images of people being so comfortable with the routines of high tides is incredible. To me, floods are a terrifying indication of climate change and the negative impact it has on the world. While this book talks about the dangers of worsening tides, the images portrayed in the book are not full of the dread that one would expect. Instead of being weighed down by the world's climate anxiety, this book is a lighthouse of climate joy. It shows people wearing rain boots that go up to their hips, businessmen splashing through the streets, and walking bridges that weave throughout the city to allow daily life to continue in the face of disruption. This book is an optimistic look at a less-than-convenient situation, a blueprint for remaining positive in the face of these growing changes.

Monsen, Avery, and Jory John. *All My Friends Are Dead* (Funny Books, Children's Book for Adults, Interesting Finds, Animal Books). San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2010.

Monsen, Avery, and Jory John. *All My Friends Are Still Dead: (Funny Books, Children's Book for Adults, Interesting Finds)*. San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2012.

I inherited these two books from my older brother when he left for college. This is the only pair of books in the collection that have any sort of connection to each other. It started with just *All My Friends Are Dead*, but after seeing how popular it was among his friends, he brought home its sequel. These books stuck with me because of my love for green dinosaurs. Those who know me know about my collection of dino stuffies and figurines, all named some variation of Linus. So, when I saw a pair of books up for grabs with green dinos on the covers, it was without question that they were added to my collection. The *All My Friends Are Dead* books are compilations of jokes about loneliness and isolation in a world where objects are alive and have a conscience. Some sadder examples include the dinosaur from the front cover stating, "All my friends are dead", and the baker holding a tray of rolls who admits, "All of my friends are bread". More comical examples include the pirate who says, "All my friends have scurvy. Yarr" or the two men trapped on a deserted island who joke about the only ship they need being "friend-ship". Together, these yellow and blue books will make for a beautiful splash of color on my future coffee table.

Newman, Michael. *Grease*. Fotonovel Publications, 1978.

My mom thinks it's hilarious that I've inherited this old book of hers, but when my grandma offered to let me scrounge through her basement of long forgotten childhood treasures, I knew that I was going to find something good. Lo and behold, a pocket-sized book about the movie Grease! This book gives a different perspective of the classic 1978 film, Grease. In today's world, it's simple enough to watch your favorite scenes from movies online, or find a video essay which divulges hidden plots or the incredibly-detailed-yet-never-mentioned backgrounds of various characters. However, my mom explained that before the "world wide webs", books like this were part of a favorite past time with friends for memorizing hit lines and cooing over cool outfits from the films. This book also includes special details like the unspoken thoughts of characters written in speech bubbles above their heads. Plus, who wouldn't want to learn the lyrics to Greased Lightnin' alongside cutouts of a dancing John Travolta brushing his hair and making sultry faces at the camera? Watching the movie has never been the same since I was introduced to Rizzo's sassy inner dialogue. Because of that, this book will no longer sit far from my living room couch in case of a watchalong need.

Pyle, Nathan W. *Strange Planet*. vol. 1, William Morrow, 2019. 2 vols.

I love that social media can expose you to so many different artists and small businesses, and so I tend to follow a lot of creative folk like Nathan Pyle. When he announced that he was publishing a book full of the simple martian comic strips that first drew me to his account, I decided to support his art by adding his book to my collection. Pyle has a quirky style of depicting everyday actions such as hiking, salting your food, singing to yourself, putting on clothes, and watching horror movies in a humorous way. The little blue extraterrestrials are meant to represent us humans, and their adventures examine how strange the things we do might seem to an alien race. I am reminded of the videos that went viral a while back about what your native language sounds like to somebody who doesn't speak it. I tend to pick up this book when I'm pondering just what it is to be human, and am always happy to be greeted by its warm color world that is gentle on the eyes, drawings that are easy to understand, and dialogue that makes you stop and think about the world we live in.

Quino. *Mafalda lo mejor*. Edited by Pedro Alberto Briceño Polo, Perú, Los Libros Mas Pequeños Del Mundo, 2017.

This is by far the smallest book in my collection, with its bright red and yellow hard cover measuring in at just 2 ½ inch by 2 inch by 1 inch inches. It is also my newest book, having only received it in November of 2024, so I haven't quite made it through the entire thing yet. So far, I've been enjoying flipping through a couple pages at a time and refreshing my underused Spanish vocabulary. It was gifted to me by a loved one who knew about my collection and brought it back as a souvenir from a family trip to Peru. Though tiny, it is packed full of the best of the beloved Argentinian character, Mafalda. Before obtaining this book, I'd only really known of Mafalda from the bits I'd been shown in Spanish classes throughout high school and have really enjoyed getting to know her further in this itty bitty bound book.

Riley, Andy. *The Book of Bunny Suicides*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2003.

This book was initially a Christmas gift from me to my older brother, but he donated it back to my collection when he left for college. I was quite nervous as he opened this gift in front of my grandparents that year. Although we might appreciate the morbid humor of hand drawn rabbits accidentally digging their burrows into a nuclear testing site or bouncing on a trampoline underneath spinning helicopter blades, who knew what my mom's elderly parents would think of even just the bright orange cover which depicts a toaster with a long pair of rabbit ears sticking out of one of the slots. To our surprise, my eighty year old grandma, who is typically the most violence-averse person I know, sat flipping through the book, giggling, for the next half hour. Having seen how much joy this book

brought her, its place in my collection was cemented in hopes that someone else will be as caught off guard as she was by the outrageous images you'll find within.

Schulz, Charles M. *It's Fun to Lie Here and Listen to the Sounds of the Night!* San Francisco, Determined Productions, Inc., 1970.

I bought this Charlie Brown book as a souvenir from a bookstore called Once Upon a Time in Arkansas while visiting my roommate and her family in Oklahoma. We've been roommates since our freshman year and finally, as seniors, got to visit each others' hometowns in the fall. We showed each other around our favorite haunts, including this warehouse of a bookstore. This book caught my eye in the vintage section with its dark purple construction paper pages, vibrant Twilight-movie-blue hue, and use of black negative space in each panel, all of which came together to create a nighttime effect. Its cool coziness was visually striking and stood out compared to the typical design of black and white comics. While I decided to pay the \$24 partly because of its look, Snoopy and the Peanuts gang have always held a special place in my heart. I grew up watching episodes of Charlie Brown with my family, and my dad chose to adopt our dog, Michi, specifically because her black and white coat reminded him of the cartoon beagle. Before we'd even walked out the door, this book became my all-time favorite of my collection. Thanks to its checkbook size, it can often be found in my backpack traveling with me to class.

Wilson, Tom. *Ziggy's Lucky/Unlucky Book.* Universal Press / American Greetings, 1973.

Lucky/Unlucky is one of the more child friendly books in this collection, and only takes about two minutes to read in its entirety, more if you sit belly laughing at each page like I do. I got it at the same time as *It's Fun to Lie Here and Listen to the Sounds of the Night!* from Once Upon a Time in Arkansas, and was drawn to it because its fading blue cover feels a bit soft and squishy like a book made for babies. The humor of this book is simply outrageous. Wilson designed each scene so that each spread shows Ziggy's best and worst case scenarios during everyday activities such as looking out the window or birdwatching. The lucky scenarios, found on the left side of the page, are more realistic moments that would make your day, like finally getting your turn in the bathroom. Meanwhile the unlucky, found on the right, are things that might spoil one's optimism, such as realizing that the stall is out of toilet paper only after you've sat down. My favorite page is about parking your car. On the left, Ziggy is pictured lucky enough to find a convenient parking spot for the day. On the right, Ziggy's bad luck brings him back to a car that's been ransacked for parts, leaving him with only the steering wheel and axles.

Stoddard, Sandol, and Sandol Stoddard Warburg. *I Like You*. Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

On the Little Free Library shelf in my high school best friend's neighborhood, the scribbled on pages of this book made me think it was a portable coloring book for children. The book's bright pink cover is eye-catching and contrasts with the black and white drawings inside, reminding me of Shel Silverstein's books *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *A Light in the Attic* from my childhood. I recall disliking this book initially because of that association, finding the book to feel clunky without Silverstein's satisfying rhymes. But, upon picking it up a second time, I came to appreciate that this book is written like either a platonic or romantic love letter, with its last page reading, "I guess I don't know why I like you really. Why do I like you? I guess I like you... I guess I like you because I like you." I have many a times taken quotes from this book when writing heartfelt messages to friends, and like to have it laying around for easy inspiration.

Wheeler, Shannon. *I Don't Get It*. Los Angeles, BOOM! Studios, 2014.

I can't recall where this book came from, and thus will assume that it was in a giveaway pile in my own house, which likely means it came from my older brother. I remember not understanding a lot of the more cynical jokes made in Wheeler's comics, but appreciated nonetheless that they were only a one-frame puzzle to figure out. Even when I was too young to fully understand the humor, I was drawn to Wheeler's work in the New Yorker magazines my art teacher gave us to use as collage materials. I found that even when you don't understand the words written on the page, Wheeler still provides you with a beautiful drawing of a peaceful scene from daily life. For example, strangers at a vets office, a cat using the litter box, friends gathering at a dinner party, and more. I always imagine that this book adds a level of maturity to my collection that will be appreciated alongside the sillier books it's shelved with.

Wohl, Jack, and Roger Price. *The Conformers*. New York, Pocket Books Inc., 1960.

This book follows the compilation-of-loosely-related-quips format that I seem to gravitate toward, this time focusing on the topic of fitting in, or standing out, in the modern social hierarchy. I picked this book up from a pile of free books at my high school library and was first attracted to it by the foreword written by Roger Price. These types of books often leave you to interpret and appreciate them as you please, but this one came with a sort of guide by providing the context of its creation. In a very casual tone, Price writes about how Wohl was inspired to start making this abstract art by his psychiatrist who thought it would help him process the complexities of human life. As you read about the red ball named Harriet and her kiki and bouba neighbors, you start to realize the genius of how efficiently Wohl communicates his vision with just a few strokes of shape and color. Though this book may be more than 60 years old, its creative look at societal norms offers a great perspective to folks looking to ponder the pressure to conform visually.