

Occupy T.O. and the POW

It's a sunny Saturday in October and the library is hopping. A man in a threadbare coat checks out the new arrivals in the non-fiction section. A young mother sits on a blanket with her toddler reading Dr. Seuss by the children's books. A seemingly endless stream of people squeeze into the small space to drop off books, check out new arrivals or just chat with friends. Today's librarian smiles, welcoming all and ready to help. This is a typical scene in a typical library. Except this library is only three weeks old and it's housed in a Mongolian Yurt in a public park, in the heart of an international social movement that has the world talking about social justice, wealth inequity and rising poverty levels. This is the People's Library, at the heart of Occupy Toronto's encampment in St. James Park.

Regardless of your views on the Occupy protests that grabbed headlines around the world last October, the People's Library and the promise it holds for knowledge-sharing, connect all librarians to the movement. From New York City to Toronto, public and open source libraries blossomed in parks, plazas and even on benches in the Fall of 2011. The speed with which the community they fostered emerged and

the knowledge they spread serve as an inspiration. How quickly the libraries were shut down and, in some cities, the violence used by governments and land-owning corporations, serves as a warning of how those in power can react to unconventional ideas at inconvenient times.

Small Idea, Big Reaction

The idea behind the People's Library was simple: bring books to the nearest Occupy encampment and leave them for others to borrow. From R.A. Salvatore fantasy novels to the writings of Howard Zinn, people brought books and people borrowed books. No library card needed. No computer databases to track the books, just communication, creativity, honesty and a roster of volunteer librarians. The libraries began as a few books spread on a tarp on the muddy ground. Soon, they were promoted to shelves made from milk crates and plastic tubs, organized by genre. In a few short weeks, many libraries got their own shelters to protect them from the elements. In Toronto, the People's Library was housed in a colourful, welcoming and warm Mongolian Yurt and became the heart of the Occupy encampment. The library was a place to come for quiet

conversation, discover a new author or just rest. Not so different from a "real" library. Ideas developed, discussion thrived and, for many, a lost sense of community was rediscovered.

Many Books from Many Sources

People arrived with boxes of old paperbacks, ranging from romance to fantasy and everything in between. Others brought hard-to-find or controversial books on politics, economics and society. It was an eclectic mix of titles that would please any librarian.

As a children's author, I wanted to share my own books as part of the collection. I brought a few of my graphic novels and added them to the milk crate shelves in Toronto's library. Staff members from the Ontario Library Association also brought stacks of children's books. In Occupy camps across the country, professional librarians and library studies students volunteered their time and skills to organize the books and run the operations of the library. From the People's Lovely Library in Vancouver to the library in Liberty Plaza in New York City, it was clear librarians saw the potential in a people-powered, open source knowledge exchange.