

# The Rolling Librarian

College instructor Laura Moulton's mobile lending library connects homeless readers with literature—and a community

**O**UR MOBILE library opened in 2011, after I got the idea to do a three-month project that combined my love of books with my interest in people who live outdoors or in shelters. At first it was just me on a Haley tricycle that I found on Craigslist here in Portland, Oregon. My brother helped me add a drawer to the cargo box and decorate the bike with stencil art. It became very much a rolling case of curiosities, and that's what I wanted: to draw people in. I started showing up downtown twice a week, at the same times and places every week. I'd park the trike, open the book drawer and let people browse for reading material to borrow. Within a couple of months, I had a few volunteers helping out, which was huge, because it was a bit of a lonesome endeavor at the beginning. By the end of the three months, we just didn't want to stop.

I fancied myself very open-minded and unsurprisable back then, but I was quickly blown away by the caliber of conversations I was having with the patrons and by their book requests. In our society we sometimes have a lopsided view of people who live outdoors. We tell ourselves stories about how they might have landed there. But those stories can overshadow what people have to offer. These are people with the grit to survive some really rough situations.

One of the library's most reliable patrons from the start was Ben "Hodge" Hodgson, a veteran with a slight build and professorial glasses. When we first met, Hodge inspected the books and asked me, "What kind of librarian doesn't stock P.G. Wodehouse?" (I got some Wodehouse books to lend him.) Things have changed since then. Hodge now



lives in a tidy apartment and is on the board of directors of Street Books.

One of the most powerful things about the tricycle library is the way it brings people together. A housed person might stop and ask, "What is this contraption?" I've witnessed so many conversations between a person like that and, say, a borrower who has come to get the sequel to a book they've just read. Those two people might fall into conversation, talking about this or that author. And each of

them might learn something from it.

What do I wish I had known at the beginning of all this? I guess how rich and wonderful it was going to be. That would have helped me get through some of the dark, drippy days when I was by myself. That would have helped sustain me. —As told to Barbara Finkelstein

*Laura Moulton, 50, is an adjunct professor at the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College and the executive director of Street Books in Portland, Oregon.*