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Kids don't have access to enough books in Baltimore's 'book deserts.' One 'street librarian' is among those trying to change that

Araba Maze and others say that if kids see themselves represented in children's books, they'll become lifelong readers

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Araba Maze noticed neighborhood kids gathering around her as she read children's books to her niece on her front stoop. As she wrapped up storytelling, one of the kids asked, "When are you gonna do this again?"

She later made it an everyday occurrence to have storytime readings with the neighborhood kids, and eventually became a librarian.



But she noticed that things felt different on the job: "After I was a librarian, I realized that I wasn't reaching those same kids in my neighborhood inside the library."

Maze took to the streets, becoming a "Radical Street Librarian" and the creator of The Storybook Maze Project, an organization that's working to provide children's books via community bookshelves, free pop-up book stands and book-vending machines to Baltimore neighborhoods classified as "book deserts." Maze is one of many people and organizations trying to bring more equity to Baltimore in the form of diverse and relatable books

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What's a book desert?

The group Unite for Literacy coined the term “book desert” to describe a geographic area where print books and other reading materials are hard to obtain. They are usually located in areas of high poverty and income inequality. The lack of books in a child’s reading development can negatively affect one’s vocabulary and ability to recognize words.

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Baltimore City has a lot of book deserts, according to a global book desert [map](#) that Unite For Literacy made. The map shows the estimated percentage of homes with more than 100 books in areas of the city — and for the vast majority of East and West Baltimore, that figure is in the single digits. It also shows higher figures in some North Baltimore neighborhoods — for example, there’s an estimated 79% of homes that meet that criteria in Roland Park.

“We have in our communities, areas where there is a lack of resources to kids becoming lifelong readers,” said Mike McGuffee, CEO of Unite for Literacy.

A bevy of Little Free Libraries, bookstores and the Enoch Pratt Free Library system are working in tandem to address that gap.

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“The map was trying to make the problem visible so that community organizations say, ‘I want to focus on this,’ and look at the map and you can pretty much guess where to do the equity work,” McGuffee said.

The map shows a significant difference in book access for those living in the “Black Butterfly” neighborhoods across the west and east sides of the city and the “White L” communities that run down the center and across the bottom of the city. Those in the “butterfly” are estimated to have less access to books at home, while those in the “L” are estimated to have more.

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that in 2019, about half of eighth graders in Baltimore public schools scored below the basic level for reading. However, McGuffee suggested that part of the reason why reading scores are low is because nominal improvement in scores was prioritized over building regular reading habits.



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“Sometimes I think we’re a little misguided about what we’re (moving) towards: grade-level proficiency, everybody’s reading level, that sorta thing,” McGuffee said. “What we really need to be talking about is ‘What do we want for our kids?’ And we want them to be lifelong readers.”

There are resources to do so in Baltimore, but each comes with its own constraints, from content to accessibility.

Enoch Pratt Free Library system



The Enoch Pratt Free Library-Govans Branch on Bellona Avenue on Aug. 9, 2022. This library is temporarily closed. (Taneen Momeni/Taneen Momeni/The Baltimore Banner)

One way to increase access to books at no cost is through the Enoch Pratt Free Library system, which was founded in 1882, and has since grown into a network with 22 branches located all over the city.

Meghan McCorkell, the marketing and communications chief for the Pratt system, said that for as long as it's been around, the library system has

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been one of the most trusted institutions in the city, with services that fit the needs of the community.

“I always laugh and say if there’s a community problem, even if it’s very far outside the bounds of a library, people always are like ‘Well, the Pratt can solve it,’” McCorkell said. “We actually had people in the pandemic say that they knew it was a real issue when the Pratt library closed ... ‘cause they trusted us so much that if we made the decision to close, then they knew (COVID-19) must be a real issue.”

Aside from offering books for checkout, the Pratt system has bookmobiles and a mobile job center that travel to neighborhoods to serve those who might not have the time or resources to visit their nearest library.

Maze believes that her efforts to provide free books to kids complement Pratt’s efforts.

“The library can’t do everything, so [Storybook Maze] is here to support them in that,” Maze said.

Bookstores

Kate Khatib, a worker-owner of a bookstore called Red Emma’s, said opening and maintaining bookstores in general is difficult because of a lack of resources for small business development in Baltimore City. This is particularly a problem in East and West Baltimore, she said.

“It’s especially hard, I think, trying to open a business outside of the immediate geographic center of the city because there are even (fewer) resources — even less support,” Khatib said.

It can be a challenge for a bookstore to succeed in lower-income communities, she said.

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“If you’re opening a bookstore, sustaining a bookstore in an area that’s economically marginalized, if your client base is people that don’t have a lot of money, you’re struggling to figure out how to meet the needs of your community while also making enough money,” Khatib said.

Red Emma’s and other bookstores, such as Urban Reads Bookstore, manage to do so by having a dining and café component to keep the doors open and provide a community space for author talks and events.

“There are bookstores that exist to sell books and then there are bookstores that exist to create community,” Khatib said.

Khatib hopes to see all of Baltimore’s bookstores work together to help get kids the books they want to read.

“I would love to see and invite my fellow book sellers to think about how we can collaborate to address that,” Khatib said. “Between all of us ... it’s our job to put those resources to work for the community.”

Little Free Library and community efforts

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A Little Free Library stands outside the entrance of the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House. While the library is easily accessible during the museum's work hours, it is locked behind courtyard gates when the museum is closed. (Taneen Momeni)

The Little Free Library is a nonprofit organization that's widely known for its mini-libraries on a post. What makes them great for getting books into people's hands is that anyone can get a book from a number of these libraries for free, hence the title.

Maze is admittedly a huge fan of the Little Free Library initiative but acknowledged that there are challenges to setting up a library in a community, including cost and contents. For example, the cheapest Little Free Library kit starts at \$169.95.

"It depends on the community to fund the initial building of it, have a property that it can stay on and keep it filled," Maze said. "That's why sometimes you tend to see them in more affluent areas, because those people can afford to build one, they own the property."

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This can be seen on the Little Free Library World [Map](#). While there are Little Free Libraries all over Baltimore, there's a higher concentration down the middle of the city and in North Baltimore and fewer in East and West Baltimore.

Storybook Maze has contacted an organization about helping to supply a steady supply of relatable children's books to a Little Free Library. In addition, anyone with children's books can donate them to a Little Free Library.

In addition, [The Book Thing of Baltimore](#) gives away free books once a month on the weekends, and are also accepting book donations.

'Kids need to see themselves in books'



Araba Maze in the aisles of Central Library in Mount Vernon. (Taneen Momeni/The Baltimore Banner)

One of the ways that Maze is thinking about getting children's books to as

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instead of snacks. She plans to place these vending machines at high-traffic areas, including laundromats, general markets, hospitals and more. Maze hopes that by reaching out to community leaders and organizations, she can eventually schedule and set up more free pop-up book stands like the one she initially established with Tendea Family, an organization that works to support Black communities in Baltimore. With every pop-up book stand, she uses her knowledge as a librarian to curate books to meet the community's needs.

One thing that Maze, McGuffee, and Khatib agree on is that the books that kids should get reflect their experiences and identity, and that kids deserve to see themselves in all types of media.

"It really engages (kids) more when they can see themselves in the books or in the media that they're consuming," Maze said.

Khatib said that when she grew up as a brown girl in Kentucky along the Bible Belt, she experienced an information and representation desert because the reading material was mostly white- and Christian- centered.

"I was constantly looking and seeking, trying to find, 'Is there anybody in any books that looks like me, that has an experience similar to mine?'" Khatib said. "When we set out to start Red Emma's, it was not just me ... there were other people who had similar experiences."

McGuffee believes that if kids of all backgrounds are properly represented in children's books, a greater number will become lifelong readers and develop the skills that come with that.

"Kids need to see themselves in books, and they need to see other kids that look like them are avid readers," McGuffee said. "They need to see authors that look like them, represent them, all of that."

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Maze's typical workday involves reaching out to local businesses seeking a permanent spot for her vending machines, and doing more outreach with pop-up bookstands during community events. She believes it's worthwhile work.

“When I was reading one day on the stoop, I opened the page and the little girl stopped me from turning the page. She was just staring at an image of herself: that book also had a little Black girl living, and she was just transfixed,” Maze said. “That really affirmed for me that I’m doing important work.”


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