



BY CARRIE OLEJNIK

It all started when Russell Wattenberg was managing Dougherty's Pub during Happy Hour one Friday evening. He welcomed a group of teachers to help themselves to a stack of books lying in the back of his van. And he continued to receive books from people because, well, it was his "thing."

Wattenberg's "thing" now provides anyone from a priest to the homeless with open access to owning books, changing lives around Baltimore.

Established in 1999, The Book Thing "puts unwanted books into the hands of those who want them." Books are donated to the nonprofit organization for members of the community to pick up and take home free of charge.

"Other organizations provide books to specialized groups like prisoners, hospitals or senior citizens," Wattenberg said.

"No one is crazy enough to do something like this in order provide books to all people."

Located on 3001 Vineyard Lane, with a strong volunteer base, The Book Thing is housed in a 700,000 square-foot building with four rooms and is open to the public from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. Browsers can find more than 50 categories of books ranging from classics to urban studies to TV movies. Found in the special "Recommended by Russell" section includes *Seabiscuit*, *Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood*, and *Scarlet*, among other bestsellers and a number of obscure titles.

**"No one is Crazy enough to do something like this..."**

With approximately 20,000 to 30,000 books leaving The Book Thing each week, it has outgrown its original location, the basement of a Charles Street rowhouse.

"Most of the books get donated to us during the week," Wattenberg explained. "We track the number of books going out, not the ones coming in."

The largest delivery to The Book Thing happened about five years ago when a medical book business donated between 300,000 to 400,000 books when they closed the doors of their business. Late April through early July is the most popular time of year for The Book Thing to receive new books.

"Baltimore City school teachers may not be sure where they'll be reassigned the following year," Wattenberg

explained. "That time of year also marks the end of the college academic year so a lot of college students are moving and need to get rid of books."

Groups have also come in throughout the week on a field trip type basis.

"Our ultimate goal is to reach more people more effectively," Wattenberg said.

## 7 Strange Titles

that have made The Book Thing's Shelves  
(courtesy of [www.bookthing.org](http://www.bookthing.org))

Alien Abductees Handbook  
How to Enjoy Sex while Conscious  
Handbook of Underwater Acoustics  
How to Read a Book  
Psychological Effects Preventing  
Nuclear War

Population Control through Nuclear Pollution

## THE INFO

**The Book Thing of Baltimore, Inc.**

3001 Vineyard Lane

Baltimore, Maryland 21218

Open 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

[www.bookthing.org](http://www.bookthing.org)

\*All photos by Allan Brinser

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