

Lost and found – and free for all!

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Greenwich Free Library

Since the onset of winter's early darkness, I've been uncomfortable taking my dog for a walk in the evening. I can't see much, and I know we can't be seen. I noticed some of the neighborhood dogs wear LED light-up collars, and after a few weeks of fumbling with a flashlight, I asked my husband to pick one up at Benson's. At last Sidney was properly dressed for the dark streets, and my hands were free. This lasted for one walk. Upon returning home, I removed the collar, and put it... somewhere. It's been weeks, and I cannot find the stinking thing. I've looked in every logical spot and in most illogical spots. I've been here before. I stash things in a Very Special Location that I will not forget. Or in the process of putting something in its own designated spot, I get distracted by a phone alert, a noise outside, or the sudden recollection that I've forgotten to press send on that email I worked on for two hours. The thing never makes it to its designated spot, and I'll find it a few days later and think, why is this lipstick in the bin of dog collars, and where the heck is that brand new dog collar?

I share this because I want you to know that I understand, completely and without judgment, how difficult it can sometimes be to return a library book.

Under the direction of Annie Miller, Greenwich Free Library went "fine free" several years ago, well before it was widespread practice. This means that if you return a book to our library, you will be charged nothing, even if it's overdue. Even if it's *really* overdue. But we still want those books back, so if the item has been missing for more than a few weeks, it's assumed lost and patrons will receive a notice in the mail asking them to pay for the book. This seems fair. The library and its patrons make an agreement: we will share these resources with all of our neighbors. We will all do our best to take care of them and make them available to as many people as possible. That's the deal.

But sometimes the deal isn't as easy to uphold as it should be. Sometimes, we at the library improperly shelve or miss label something, and a patron is charged in error. Sometimes the book you absolutely swore you returned to the green bin is actually under the seat in your car. Sometimes we make mistakes.

And in some circumstances those mistakes mean a patron cannot take books out of the library. And some of those patrons are children. I became a librarian because I fundamentally believe that the world is better when more people have access to information and ideas. Limiting a child's access to books is antithetical to my personal and professional mission, and I find it to be just plain wrong.

A few weeks ago Katrina Williams, Elementary School librarian at GCS, contacted me about the upcoming Greenwich Reads Together (GReaT) project at school. All students will read Roald Dahl's classic *Matilda*, and as part of the program launch Katrina plans to include a Greenwich Free Library card application. In the opening chapter, four-year-old Matilda visits her local public library, reads her way through the entire children's section, and is fortunate enough to meet a librarian who, despite some misgivings about such a young patron visiting the library alone, introduces her to Charles Dickens. I was thrilled with Katrina's idea to tie-in our own public library, and giddy at the prospect of a few Matilda types exploring our stacks. Whether it's *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 1861) or *A Tale of Two Kitties* (Pilkey, 2017), I know our library has



something for every kid. But here's the problem. A non-zero number of real-life Matildas have library accounts with blocks. This could be for many different reasons: a move that resulted in misplaced or still unpacked boxes, a younger sibling who wished to enhance a book's original artwork, a teething puppy, caregivers in different households or different states, an unzipped backpack, or just the simple and common mistake of misplacing something. And while the vast majority of these mistakes are rectified by grown-ups who locate the book or pay for the lost item, that just doesn't happen in every single case. Take the

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scenarios I outlined above, add in one or two more complicating factors, and it is not hard to see why a first grader may have a \$12 balance that goes back to their toddler years. I couldn't answer Katrina's proposal without making a plan for that first grader.

I am proud to announce that the Greenwich Free Library Board of Trustees has agreed to a one-time amnesty for all fines and fees on the accounts of patrons under 18. By February 28th, 2023 all kids registered at our library will have a clean slate.

What does this mean for the library and our budget in practical terms? And, is it fair to the patrons who do return their books, or pay for misplaced items, that these children should be allowed to try again?

As to the budget, the estimated amount of potential payments that we'll sacrifice comes to a little over \$2,100. But the reality is that regardless of whether we waive these fees, we cannot expect to get most of that money back. About half of the total are for items that have been deleted from the system. These are essentially books that we have accepted are lost forever, yet we continue to keep these charges on patron accounts. Some of these charges go as far back as 2012. The total amount that we took in during 2022 for replacement book fees (this includes all patrons, juvenile and adult) was \$584.06, and we have \$500 budgeted for 2023. I do not expect that this particular amnesty program will change that number in any significant way.

But the more lost books we can recover, the

better, so we will use all funds collected in our circulation desk donation jar until the end of March to go towards book replacements. If you've ever found yourself grateful for our lack of late fines, or if you can imagine what it might be like for a family to misplace a handful of board books, perhaps you'll consider making an extra donation the next time you visit the library. I'll start. When I was in grad school many years ago, working three part-time jobs (at two libraries and a restaurant) and finishing an Internship (at the historical society), I couldn't have completed my coursework without materials from the public library. I would regularly have 10-20 books out at a time, and back then (as now, I'm sorry to admit) I found it difficult to return all of my books on time. Brooklyn Public Library followed in Greenwich's footsteps a few years ago, and no longer charges fines, but at the time the daily penalty was up to 25 cents. My balance was hovering around \$40, which despite all of that part-time employment, was a figure with which I couldn't easily part. A friend who had recently become a branch manager cleared those charges for me. Technically, he shouldn't have. I had failed to uphold my end of the bargain, and the penalty was one I understood when I borrowed those books. But his action made a huge difference to my life that day, and I'll gladly contribute \$40 into our donation jar this week.

As to whether an amnesty program of this type is "fair," I guess maybe it isn't. It's not an impartial decision; and some people will benefit more than others. But when more children use more library materials, one indirect result is more materials for *all* children; book budgets, after all, reflect patron use. And if even one single child reads more, or learns more, or feels more a part of our community because they can use a library card again? Well, I guess I care more about that than about fairness.

At the time of this writing, I know where all of my checked out library books are, but I still haven't found Sidney's light-up collar. I know it will turn up one of these days. Many of these missing books will turn up, too. If you find one under your car seat, bring it in. Nobody will judge you, and we'll all be glad to welcome it home.

Sarah Murphy is Director of the Greenwich Free Library.

