

A bicycle built for books

Gabe Levinson is pedaling a dream: Free books to get folks reading, talking

By Robert Duffer
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

A new book, for free. There has to be a catch, right? All Gabe Levinson wants from his Book Bike project is to get people reading.

On a perfect July Saturday in Wicker Park, Levinson debuted his tricycle-turned-bookmobile. "Hipster's paradise," he smiled, tipping up his tan fedora to the dog walkers and sunbathers on the grass. Himself a literary hipster wearing Chuck Taylors and faded jeans, the 25-year-old Columbia College grad had barely broken a sweat on his leisurely ride from his Lincoln Square apartment.

"It's slower but comfortable," Levinson explained of his vehicle from Haley Tricycle (haleytrikes.com), a Philadelphia-based urban cargo transport business. "The weight of the books helps it ride smoother."

He unfurled the teal-colored Book Bike's split lid and split-hinged front panel to display 100 new books that he had solicited from nearly 20 publishers. Independent presses such as Akashic and Soft Skull, as well as top-five publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux, donated books from their list by Chicago authors.

"All these publishers are blindly trusting me," Levinson said. He keeps a hand-

written log of every book to update the publishers on popular titles and request replacements. He refuses to take a book for himself.

Though initially incredulous, the loungers and passersby in Wicker Park were happy to lighten his load.

"It's not necessarily wacky but it's a new idea, innovative," said a Wicker Park resident, leafing through her new hardcover copy of "The Complete Peanuts." Her three friends, visiting from London and Seattle, remarked that the Book Bike's generosity isn't surprising for the people of Chicago.

The surprise for Levinson was that it attracted nearly all women. Two passing men showed no interest. Other men seemed curious from a distance.

Two more women approached who didn't want a book. "We just wanted to tell him how smart we think he is."

He blushed.

If it wasn't Levinson's motivation to meet women, then it made for a fine perk of his self-funded endeavor: "If I knew this was all it took, give them books?" he laughed.

"Honestly, I love the idea of the collective experience. I love the idea of people talking about it down the road, thinking fondly of it." He opened a book. Its title page, like those of the other books, was stamped with the logo "Something to Read."



Tribune photos by Christopher Booker

Astride his Book Bike, Gabe Levinson hands out free books in Wicker Park—and as a bonus, finds a new way to meet women.

The Book Bike is the first tangible part of Something to Read (somethingto-read.net), which, like most of Levinson's ideas, is a work in progress. He wants readers to become intimate with the "insane amount of creative talent" in the Chicago literary scene.

"I want to bring in readers to see how much of an effect they have on the vibrant, dynamic literary scene we have here." Something to Read can be anything that fits his ever-growing idea: The online journal will be "essays from readers, interviews with librarians, anything on reading and writing in Chicago."

Once an actor, now a writer and books editor for Make Magazine, Levinson isn't daunted by big endeavors with little monetary return.

"I'm used to a low standard of living," he said. He gets by working front of house at Steppenwolf Thea-

tre and at a record store.

"I think this is such a cool concept. I'd like to see him in my neighborhood. It's awesome," said Tracy Striggle, a graphic designer from Logan Square, who was drawn to the quirky design of the literary journal McSweeney's, which she had never heard of.

That's the idea, Levinson says: to introduce readers to new authors and publishers and to "foster dialogue and discussion on books."

After six hours in the sun, Levinson had lightened his load by nearly half. At one point, with Book Bike readers scattered over the lawn, he glowed. "This is the coolest thing."

As long as publishers keep sending him books, he'll be handing them out in Chicago parks every Saturday.

Look for the Book Bike Saturday at Horner Park and at Lollapalooza in Grant Park.

