

DISRUPTOR Presents: The Sweet Kiss of Community



TODD BOL - LITTLE FREE LIBRARY



DISRUPTOR.
Tales From the Edges of Publishing

EPISODE
2

HOW ONE MAN WITH A SIMPLE IDEA - AND A KNACK FOR
DISRUPTION - IS PUTTING BOOKS INTO THE HANDS OF
MILLIONS OF READERS.

A conversation with Todd Bol, the Founder of Little Free Library.

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Todd Bol passed away recently at the age of 62. You may not know the name, but you've seen his impact. If you've passed by a home, or a firehouse, or a school that has a Little Free Library out in front, you've met Todd.

You see, Todd is the man who thought the whole thing up, and then spread this beautiful idea around the globe. He didn't do it for money, nor fame. He just wanted more people to read, and more neighbors to get to know one another. Today, 77,000+ Little Free Libraries later, Todd's simple idea is putting books into the hands of millions, and creating tighter, more connected neighborhoods in the process.

I had the privilege of interviewing Todd as one of the very first guests on my podcast, DISRUPTOR. He was a lovely, thoughtful and deeply inspiring man. A friend who heard the interview when it posted told me she wept just listening to such a decent man who viewed the world not with anger or distress, but as a garden for dreams to flower. And books were his water.

When the news of his passing came out, she texted me to tell me how gutted she was to hear about the loss of a man she had only known for the duration of a 30 minute recording. I feel the same way, and so do many, many others in the publishing community.

I invite you to take the time to meet Todd. His words will forever change your attitude about whether a regular person like *you* can have a massive impact for good.

Be inspired by what he's done, and help carry his torch of understanding, knowledge and love of reading onward. And please share this interview so others may know this remarkable man.

Rest in Peace, Todd. May a million Little Free Libraries bloom in your memory.

A red handwritten signature that appears to read "Jon".

Jon Bard

Host, DISRUPTOR

Transcript of Episode 2 of DISRUPTOR: Tales From the Edges of Publishing.

This recording may be found at <https://publishingdisruptor.com/one-simple-idea-a-massive-explosion-of-reading/>

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Can the world be transformed simply by giving free books to everybody everywhere? One man's on a mission to find out and you're about to meet him.

JON BARD: Greetings one and all, and welcome to DISRUPTOR Episode 2 Todd Bol of Little Free Library. My name's Jon Bard.

I've been in the publishing world for close to 30 years and I've seen a lot of things change, but maybe they haven't changed fast enough. And so I asked the question, are there disruptors out there? Are there people and companies that are really changing things in publishing, pushing us into the future, throwing out the old rule book and creating a new one all their own? I went in search of that and I found them. And every week here on DISRUPTOR, you'll meet them. Welcome to the journey. It's time to disrupt.

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JON: Truly disruptive ideas don't have to be complex. They don't have to be futuristic. Sometimes a simple notion can lead to a giant disruption. Take the case of Todd Bol. In 2009, Todd built his mother - a teacher and lifelong reader - a gift, a small replica one room schoolhouse with a glass door on front and filled with books. They put it in their front yard. Soon people came by to borrow books and put books in. Neighbors asked if Todd could build them their own little schoolhouse library. He did and it caught the attention of a local professor named Rick Brooks.

Together Bol and Brooks looked at how they could take this simple idea and turn it into something truly special. Inspired by Andrew Carnegie, who in the early part of the 20th century, set a goal to fund the creation of 2,500 free libraries, Bol and Brooks created their own goal to have more than 2,500 Little Free Libraries. Today, there are more than 75,000 Little Free Libraries around the world. This disruptive idea that started with a simple gift is truly transforming the world.

Let's meet Todd Bol.

It is my pleasure to be joined by Todd Bol. He is the founder of Little Free Library and a true Disruptor in the most lovely sense of the word. Welcome to DISRUPTOR, Todd.

TODD: Thank you very much. I'm glad to be here. It's an exciting interview topic. Thank you.

JON: Let us begin with a question I like to ask all my guests. We here at DISRUPTOR celebrate the rebels, the mavericks, and the weirdos of the book world. Which one of those three words best describes you?

TODD: You know as soon as you said that...I think it depends who you're asking. I think you can get all of those from different people that know me. I never think of myself as a disruptor and then I get often accused that I am, you know, I guess sometimes I'm a bit of a rebel because I don't follow the lines necessarily or what should be done. I guess my record, I guess, as a kid when I was in school was that I would be told that I was contraire and that I was brash and I never thought I was any of those things. I only thought that I wanted to understand. Just the other day, I was talking to a group of 4H kids between 9 and about 15 and there's one little kid in the front that just kept asking question after question after question and it was irritating and I thought to myself that must have been me. Perpetually curious.

JON: Tell everybody in 30 seconds or so what Little Free Library is.

TODD: Well, Little Free Library is the book exchange that goes out in front of people's houses and parks all around the world. As of August 1st, we'll have 75,000 Little Free Libraries around the world all across the United States and Canada mainly, but also in over 85 countries. A Little Free Library has this great accelerated ripple effect where you put one in, you put 10 in, there is going to be a thousand. We gave away 20 of them in Detroit and Cleveland and now there's 350 and 400 of them. So, it's a great ripple effect that I think is the better side of humanity. The better side of us that comes out when you have one in your front yard.

JON: And it is really a positive disruption because it is doing something that empowers people and that brings us together at a time when there's not a lot of things that bring us together. So, I find it just a wonderfully apt disruption for this moment in history.

TODD: It's a sweet kiss of community.

It just, it's a sweet side of us coming out. If you've ever worked in a disaster like a flood or a hurricane and you work in these situations that the community's coming together to help the community, they don't care who you are, where you're from, what you're doing, you're saving the community.

In that way, I think Little Free Library's like a flood without a flood, you know, people come together, it doesn't matter who they are, they want to fix the community and make it better, make it a better place and make sure that, you know, literacy is better in their community.

I just got done reading Madeleine Albright's book on Fascism and she talked about how 25 percent of the world, across the board, is okay with a dictator, you know, and then in her book she also said at the end, I'm not sure that people know how to tell what is true. And if you consider that 25 percent of the populace thinks a dictator is okay and then you have that element with people not knowing how to tell what is true, we're really in trouble.

And so I think literally, literally the survival of democracy is based on people's ability to read, to read well and to critically think and to understand what is true or not. And I think we really have no choice but to have a better educated population. Paul Wellstone said, "We all do better when we all do better." I really like to say we all do better when we all read better.

Now, there's a town, Lake Worth, Florida, where they have 30,000 people - one third black, one third white, one third Hispanic - just north of Fort Lauderdale. And 97 percent of their children are at reduced or free hot lunches, which is a real key to, you know, indicating poverty. So, what they did is they made sure there was one Little Free Library within safe walking distance of every child. So, they put one Little Free Library per 300 people, which is 100 Little Free Libraries.

The library stepped up, the school district, the mayor *really* stepped up, the police department, the retailers, the fire department, the whole community said - Our students are going to read, we are going to read. And they took it on as a community project to change everything.

The Los Angeles Police Department has Little Free libraries in every precinct , I think one they don't, and they said boldly in the Los Angeles Times, *Little Free libraries help prevent crime*. And I thought, well that's pretty bold. How can you say that? They said, well, 75 percent of the students that go before the, excuse me, 75 percent of the populace that goes before the juvenile court system is functionally illiterate and we know it has a direct correlation to crime, to pregnancy, to, you know, graduation rates, job rates and so on.

So, literacy is a real linchpin for the quality of the individual's life, outcomes, and their healthcare, you know, because they understand how to be a better patient, you know, because they understand and are able to critically think and read.

So, if we want to survive as a great nation, we really have no choice but to step it up in our game across the board and to make sure that everybody reads and reads well because that's the only chance we have of comprehending and understanding all the complexities that this society is really bringing about. If I could disrupt that by having people pay attention to how important it is, that's fantastic.

JON: One of the ways that you're disrupting is actually by empowering other people to disrupt. Which, I think, is why what you're doing is so powerful because if I build a Little Free Library and put it in front of my house and stock it with some books, I have disrupted my neighborhood in a very positive way and then others see it and they do the same, but you're also not just making the books available, even for people who just drive by it or walk by it, there's a message that books are important, that reading is important. They can't avoid seeing that and I think that's the sort of mind shift that happens.

So, what I really enjoy about what you set up here is that you're giving people a concrete way to disrupt in a very positive way in their own communities.

TODD: I was at a literacy conference and I got tapped on the shoulder by our former governor in Wisconsin, Governor Doyle, Jim Doyle, and he said, "You know, Todd, what's going on in America right now is not us. We're really not this divisive. We're really not this polarized." He said, "Little Free Library is more of a reflection of who we are as Americans." He said, "We reach across the aisle, we reach across the street, we pick each other up, we make each other's lives better. Not caring who somebody is or where they're from. We help them." He says, "That's who we are as Americans."

So, I will contend with you that the disruption that's going on right now in America, is not the true reflection of who we are. You know, what Little Free Library is and how we help each other, that is the reflection of who we really are. And I think if anything, we've got to shake ourselves to say, hey, let's get back to this. We can fix it.

We have a book and it's called *Little Free Library* and you can find that at [Amazon](#) or at our website, [LittleFreeLibrary.org](#). The Los Angeles Times said our book was almost perfect social justice. The San Francisco paper said it's one of America's better export, which I absolutely adore.

JON: How many countries, right now, are you in?

TODD: About 85, you know, pushing 90. Amazon.com said that *Little Free Library*

was the best book since the 1970's Whole Earth Catalog because it promised so much hope for the future.

And, you know, I think if you look at what we're doing, the stewards, the millions of people that use Little Free Libraries, you'll see that we have a big community of people that care, that want to fix things and that are really rolling up their sleeves to make a difference. And it's very contrary to what's being reported.

JON: I want to go back to the creation, that moment when it sort of came together for you, particularly the few moments before that happened because I think a lot of people listening would like to disrupt. They'd like to come up with an idea that changes the world or perhaps changes their community and they have multiple things where they can't quite get that cohesive idea.

So talk about the moments before it came together and the things that we're sort of in your head and then how it actually, how that light bulb went on for you with Little Free Library.

TODD: I built a Little Free Library. I was laid off from the job at the time and I built it in honor of my mom. When my mom died, at her funeral, I talked about two things. I talked about one, an old tradition, colonial tradition, that you give away a small gift at a funeral - gloves, hat, mittens - an old colonial tradition. And then the other thing was an old Sioux Indian saying that says

Nobody really ever passes until all they've touched are gone

And so I gave away a little necklace that said *June A. Bol - A dancing spirit-*

And then, in that spirit, later I put up a Little Free Library that was a gift to the community of love. You know, it was her books and she was always giving to the community and to the neighbors and especially kids. And that was just a present to the community and I never thought anything about it.

And, then we had a garage sale about a year later and people took pictures of the Little Free Library, talked to it like it was a puppy, you know, pitched their voices high, took selfies. One woman hugged it and I thought, *Huh, you know, this is pretty good. I don't get this one.* And, so I heard a song or I heard a tale or I heard something from the voice of the community about what this Little Free Library was. So I made 30 more of them and I tried to move them. And people were like, *What is this? This makes no sense. It's a big bird feeder. It's crazy.* And in one year, I think I moved one or two. And winter was coming in 2010 and heard a piece on Martin Luther King and he talked about how if he was going to die tomorrow, he'd plant a seed. So I said, *that's what I'll do.* So, we gave away 30 little libraries and the strategy of strategically planning them.

I just got back from New York City last week, where we put a Little Free Library in the subway. Actually, it was a Marvel library, an action hero Avengers library, and it's in the subway at the Police Department. Two years of books are going to be given away in that subway from the Disney Corporation. So, what happened is Little Free Library became kind of this is calling from the neighborhood. And, for me, it was...really what you do is you create local heroes. Everybody that, you know, is the first in their community or their neighborhood becomes a hero. They're putting the Little Free Library, they end up in the newspaper or the radio or TV. So, you create like a local heroes. And, there's a story about Gandhi. He was being interviewed during a protest and after about 15 minutes, Gandhi asked the media, he says *Excuse me, I have to go. I have to see where my followers are taking me.* So, what Gandhi was saying is he didn't lead the movement, you know, and I think the days of Martin Luther King's and Gandhi's are kind of quite limited because they'll get eaten up and beaten up. And, and so what I think that we have is we have the strength of each other.

JON: One of the things that seems very interesting to me about how this movement happened and why it's so appealing, one of the many reasons it's so appealing, is that we live in a virtual world, but here is a physical object. Here is something that exists. You know, I think that people, you can only tweet so much, you can only do so many online petitions. You can only, whatever, do so many podcasts, but what you've created here is the opportunity for people to actually put something physical into the world in the Little Free Library and then also in the books themselves that makes an impact. In a lot of ways this is a throwback, and I know Andrew Carnegie is an inspiration of yours, but it's a throwback to that sort of mentality of putting something real out into the world.

TODD: You know, I'm tactile and many of the people that have Little Free Libraries are tactile. I hear all the time book lovers say to me,
I love books. Books are part of my heart and soul and they define who I am.
And a Little Free Library is just a natural extension of that. And, in many ways of being a tactile person, what it also means is I don't feel loved unless I'm touched. And that touching is not only a physical hug or a kiss, but it is an expression of
I care.

A woman came up to us at a 4th of July parade and she was crying and she looked and she said,
I did not think that anybody loved us that much
. You know, in many ways, it sounds corny, but Little Free Library is
I care for you. I love you...in the community.

JON: How many Little Free Libraries are there now in the world? Approximately?

TODD: As of August 1, there will...we're going to celebrate the first part of August, but we're just hitting 75,000 Little Free Libraries. And, at two books a day, which is quite conservative, is over 50 million books a year. And The New York Library system is 27 million. While that's impressive, and I'm proud, the Lake Worth model of one Little Free Library per 300 people...we still have 1 million 25 thousand Little Free Libraries to go in the United States to get where we want to be, and we have, I think, 24 point 4 million worldwide to get there.

Our goal at Little Free Library is that everybody has the right to read and I want to see 90 percent of the world's population reading above the minimum reading standard. And the only way we could get there is if...it's like feminism or civil rights, it has to be a conscious effort by society that says I'm going to make sure, like Lake Worth, that everybody reads in my community and it's my job to make sure they do and it's not to point and say "it takes a village", it's to be part of that. ,And so, that's the story of Little Free Library really is everybody getting up and starting to say that it's like that old network, you know, the movie
I'm mad as hell and I can't take it anymore? I think we as people have to say
We're just gonna fix this.

JON: So, if people who are listening want to do that and want to get involved either by putting up their own Little Free Library or lobbying their local community leaders to follow the Lake Worth model, what are some things they can do? What are some tools that you might have for them?

TODD: I would say go to our Little Free Library website at [LittleFreeLibrary.org](https://www.littlefreelibrary.org) and the first thing that everybody needs to do is go down to [Flickr](#) or [Pinterest](#) and look at the 40 or 50,000 photos from around the world, the artwork, the beauty, the communities coming together is just awe-inspiring, just awe-inspiring. And then, from there, go look at our website and look at some of the stories, look at that the Libraries of Distinction, see what people are doing around the world. Get our newsletter and there's so many things that you can do. I've not found it yet where if a person wants a Little Free Library or wants to have in their community, that they don't get it. They could talk to their Rotary Club there. They can talk to their schools. They can talk to their NEA. As a matter of fact, we just signed a deal with NEA, Read across America, and we're trying to put a Little Free Library every school and we have a mobile Little Library now that folds up and you put it in the back of police cars.

And on the side of police cars, you can see it in LA and we're going to have it also in New York in the subways, but they have a magnetic sign that says *We Share Books* and the police are handing books to kids on the street corners and at ballgames and at schools and, you know, like I said, *Wherever we shall gather, there shall be books* and we want to see that with Little Free Libraries and wagons and mobiles and your front yard and just carry that truth *Wherever we shall gather, there shall be books* and somehow be in that equation. It's really rather easy and it's really, you know, quite inspiring of the many ideas that people come up with.

For instance, I know a gentleman in Arkansas who has a snub nose scissors at the end of his Little Free Library and he has books on cooking and he has all around his Little Library is a herb garden and he asks you to cut herbs and take them home and make things. And he's told me that he's quiches hot in the morning waiting for him, you know. And so, people do all kinds of fascinating things with Little Free Libraries. They turn them into food shelves, tools, they exchange with their neighbors and they share assets. So, you know, there's a million things and a million things yet to be discovered. I see Little Free Library as a new canvas, as a new way of expressing people to their communities. And it's really a common that we all share. And we believe it's China's, it's ours. Any neighbors. And so we're looking for, you know, more creativity, more wisdom. 65 percent of the people make their own and then 35 percent purchase from our nonprofit to help support our nonprofit and move that forward. But, they make their own and they just get a sign and a registration from us that's \$39 and that supports the organization. And if they can't afford that, we continually have grants and availabilities for free signs when people apply.

JON: One thing I always like to ask people who are disruptors is who is your favorite disrupter? Somebody from history, somebody who's alive today, but somebody you look at it and said, that person really shook things up for the better.

TODD: Ida B. Wells. A small black woman that when the conductor asked her to move out of the train car, she bit him. She started NAACP. She was way ahead of her time. She was, I think, five foot tall and about 105 pounds. And, so she absolutely changed the world, you know, and she was just spunky. And, I really admire that, but you know, we talk about disruption and oftentimes we think of disruption is the squeaky sound on the chalkboard as we scratch it. You know, which it is. But I often think that disruption is really an act of kindness when least expected. And, and it puts people off that you actually care. And a central theme that Little Free Library gets all the time is that they don't believe how much people really care.

JON: One final question, for those who are listening who want to disrupt, and I love what you just said about it being a kindness that when people don't expect it, when people want to do that, what is your best advice to them?

TODD: Oh, well, I'm the executive director and creator of Little Free Library. Build a Little Free Library! Get a Little Free Library out there. Get a Little Mobile Library and put it in a police department. Put it in a fire department. Put a Little Free Library in front of a school. Get a mobile library in a bus.

I was speaking in Lake Worth to about 100 eight year olds, and I asked them *How many of you are teachers?* And nobody raised their hand. And then I asked the *How many of you read your little brother and sister?* And about two-thirds of them raise their hand. And what happens is we're all really supposed to be teachers and they're all around us, the adults and the kids. And the more that we can make that a reality and the more that we can make that happen, I think the better we'll be. And I think the other part, the other side of this coin with Little Free Library, is we really need you to do that. You know, and as you know, when you're helping people what you realize is that they're helping you even more because you need people to need you. And so that's kind of, I guess, my advice.

JON: Great, well, Disruptors listening, you have your marching orders. You know what to do and be creative. So, Todd, I want to thank you not just for spending this time with us, but also for putting something beautiful out into the world at a time when the world really needed it. And I wish you just tremendous success. We'll be supporting you, we'll be following you, we'll be putting up a Little Free Library in front of our house. I intend to definitely do that and making sure there are more in my community. But what you've done is really a lovely and important thing and you're gonna change the world. So, thank you so much for that.

TODD: Thank you and I appreciate it so much and I would just like to add to that and say, for me it's a better side of us, you know, it's...Little Free Library is really made up of millions of people around the world that are fixing, changing and making the world better. And I truly believe that the great globalization is literacy because 99.9 percent of the world believes it's important and believes that it's something we need and it's a great cry around the world to help each other. So thank you and thank you for having me on your program.

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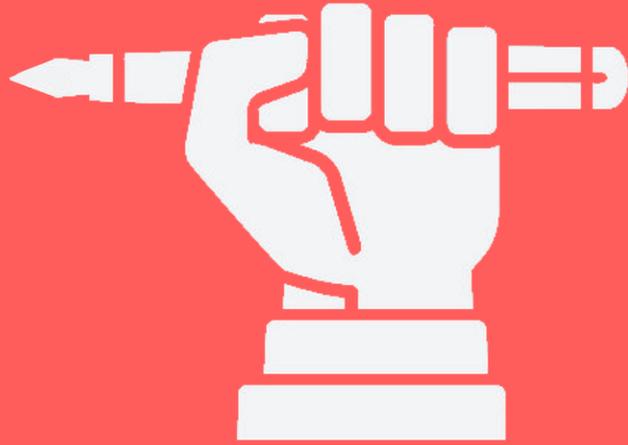
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