

Book Sale: A biography

There is no magic wand that a library or Friends group waves. No wizard says “Shazam!” and shelves and shelves (and more shelves) full of neatly sorted books suddenly appear. No, a book sale is the result of many, many people working many, many hours.

A Friends group needs a place to hold the sale. Maybe more importantly, it needs a place to sort and store all the donated material. Donated?? You mean the Friends don’t buy all those books to sell? Hah!

A book sale is born when a group of people decide to make it happen, whether it’s an official Friends of the Library group or a one person who had a brainstorm. Once a sorting and storing location is found, the next step is acquiring the books, DVDs, audiobooks, puzzles, and whatever else ends up for sale.

That means soliciting donations, which requires publicity -- in print, online, and with road signs. A Friends group may hold donation days staffed by volunteers, sometimes at the library, sometimes at a storage facility. Volunteers might be members of the Friends group or high school kids earning community service hours. If a library has space and staff that permits it, community members may drop off books at the library. Some Friends groups are lucky enough to have members who will pick up (and even box up) books – from someone downsizing, whether it’s closing up a home because of a death or just clearing off shelves. And occasionally a publisher or book store will donate excess inventory.

The next step is sorting it all – adult books, teen books, kids’ books. Does each DVD case actually have a DVD in it? Are all the CDs in the audiobook case? No, sorry, we don’t count to be sure that all 1,000 pieces are actually in the puzzle box.

How do we know what to keep? If it’s moldy, musty, stinky (especially cigarette smoke), it goes in the recycle bin. A travel book more than three years old gets recycled. How many hotels and restaurants are still there three years later, and how current are the food or lodging prices? How to Use a Computer from 1996 gets tossed. Medical, financial, and legal books more than three years old usually get pitched in the recycle bin – outdated medical information can literally be dangerous. Books used as a dog chew toy ... why do people even donate those??

Fiction is separated from non-fiction, with categories dependent on storage and selling space. Some sales divide fiction into literary, mystery, romance, science fiction, horror – depending on what’s donated and what the community wants. Nonfiction is also divided into categories, both for adult and children’s books, again dependent on space.

If you think that all sounds like a lot of work – you’re right. Volunteers from The Friends of the Southbury Library meet twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, with anywhere from six to fifteen volunteers doing “rough” sort and “fine” sort. Rough sort separates adult, teen, and children’s books. Cookbooks (we get a LOT) and gardening books are pulled out. The obviously unsaleable (see above) are thrown into a very large recycle bin called a Gaylord. Fiction is separated from nonfiction here, and divided into hardcover, mass market paperbacks, and trade paperbacks (the bigger ones). As the fiction is moved to shelves, volunteers sort them by author so they’re easier for our book sale customers to find what they’re looking for.

The nonfiction books that make the cut are moved to fine sorting, where they’re sorted by topic – art, architecture, animals, computers, business, biography, poetry, travel, music, etc., etc. Several volunteers are tasked with picking up the stacks of books and moving them to the proper shelves in the sale area.

We often pull out books for our “Old & Interesting” section. These range from early works of literature to old Bibles to a service manual for a 1954 Ford. Some of these are sold at the sale, and others are offered online, either individually or at an online auction. Some of these, of course, are old and uninteresting, or are in such poor condition that they’re literally falling apart.

So what’s next? Let’s organize a book sale! We have the books, the puzzles, the vinyl records, the DVDs, the music CDs, the audiobooks on CD, so let’s sell them. That, of course, requires a committee. The committee sets prices, selects the dates (and clears them with the library to avoid conflicts), arranges to rent tables if needed, schedules volunteers, manages publicity, rents a credit card device, asks local restaurants for food for the volunteers, and designs signs to publicize the sale.

As the sale date approaches, volunteers put out the signs around town. Some towns require a permit (and sometimes a fee) to set up signs. Publicity is designed and sent to local papers, posted online, and mailed to Friends members. We put the final touches on whatever form we use to tally sales, and have copies printed. Maps of the selling floor are finalized and copied. We make sure we have bags and boxes for those who didn’t bring them, or who didn’t bring enough. Having ample storage really helps.

In the days immediately preceding the sale, the little jobs pile up: Do we have water and coffee for the volunteers? Change for the endless twenty-dollar bills that the ATMs spit out? Pens, pencils, scotch tape, masking tape, stapler and staples? Who’s going to the bank each day with the cash deposits? Is the credit card device connected and working? Who’s going to pick up lunch so generously donated by our local restaurants?



Opening day arrives. Do we have enough volunteers to add up large orders (usually from book dealers) so we don't slow down the cashiers? Who's going to tidy up the tables and shelves after a herd of dealers has rampaged through? Lots and lots of volunteers, that's who.

I'm at the cashier table. I'm basically math illiterate, but I can tally 27 books at \$2 each plus three DVDs at \$3 each plus two very collectible vinyl albums at \$75. We all have calculators.

Most book sales charge an entry fee on the first day. The majority who line up three hours before the sale opens are book dealers hoping we missed a super-valuable book, or who are stocking a physical or online store. Some early admission attendees just want the best selection, or want to give the Friends a few extra bucks. We're grateful for all of them.

Watching book dealers use new or newish technology to check their inventory or the value of a book is fascinating. Handheld devices can check a dealer's inventory, or check the value of an item online. Dealers can be very protective (to be tactful) of the piles they're planning to buy. They can also be inconsiderate, leaving stacks of books they don't want blocking the aisles or falling off the tables. Luckily those dealers are in the minority, and we have volunteers to reshelve what they didn't want.

What's it like to work at a book sale? Fun. Tiring. Busy. Frustrating. Satisfying. All of the above.

At the end of the sale, the work still isn't over. There are leftovers to deal with, a mess to clean up, dozens of people to thank, rented equipment to return, and signs to take down. The Friends treasurer will tally the income, subtract the expenses, and prepare a report for the Friends Board.

What happens to the leftovers depends on the policies of each group. Even if the Friends group offers a free day to the community, there are almost always leftovers. If there's no storage to hold items until the next sale, books may be recycled. Some groups "adopt" a school or literacy organization -- in the area, in a regional city, or even overseas. Those schools or groups are responsible for shipping costs, since almost all Friends groups have a policy that their proceeds benefit their own community.

The income from book sales is dedicated to providing services, programs, and materials to the community. It might buy a new collection of large print books, software to manage summer reading programs, licenses to show movies, scholarships, passes to museums, improvements to the physical library or grounds, audiovisual equipment for a program room, or funding for programs for adults, teens, and kids. The library's needs determine where each Friends group spends its funds.

So much work, and so many people! Would we do it again? In a heartbeat!

Do you want to sort books for the sale? Come to the lower level of the Southbury Public Library between 9:30 and 11:30 on Tuesday or Thursday mornings and ask for John or Ken, or talk to any of the volunteers you find.

Do you have books, DVDs, or other items to donate? Call Ken at 203-233-1714, Jeff at 203-578-5988 or (after Labor Day) John at 203-525-0199 for a pickup.

Please consider joining The Friends of the Southbury Public Library. Membership starts at only \$10/year! Go to <https://www.southburylibrary.org/about-us/support-the-library/friends> for more information about the Friends, a link to join and pay online, and a downloadable membership form.

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