The Bookmooch plan: An easy way to help close the achievement gap in literacy and clean up your clutter at the same time

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There is overwhelming evidence that those who live in poverty have little access to books at home, in schools and in public and school libraries, and that the lack of access to books impacts literacy development, and also results in less knowledge of the world. Research, in fact, strngly suggests that lack of access to books is the major reason for the literacy "achievement gap," the difference in reading ability between children coming from higher and lower income families.

Someday, ebooks might be available at a reasonable cost for everybody. But until this happens, I would like to suggest one way we help close the access-to-books gap. It requires no special funding from the government or the Gates Foundation, no paperwork, and no sacrifice. In fact, we can do it in a way that benefits everybody.

Most middle-class people have extra books in their homes, books they would like to give away. We often do this by donating to goodwill-type organizations, but there is a problem: There is no way we can insure that the books get to those who really need or want them.

An organization called "bookmooch," founded by John Buckman, has solved this problem. Bookmooch (bookmooch.com) is a book swap club. You list the books you want to give away. Another bookmooch memberscan claim one of these books. You then send the book to the person and pay the postage (media mail is now $2.47). When you do this, you get one point. You can then use this point to claim somebody's else's book and they pay the postage. You can thus get books you want for only the cost of postage. (You get more points for mailing to another country, and pay more points when ordering books from another country.) There is no cost to join or use bookmooch.

And now the interesting part: Bookmooch lists charities you can donate your points to if you have some left over. Those of us bookmooch users who have built up huge book collections always have a surplus of points. Bookmooch supplies a list of "worthy causes": They include school libraries, classroom libraries, public libraries, and prison libraries.

Bookmooch members exchange about 2000 books a day and donate about 2% of their points to charities, about 10,000 books a year. As of a year ago, bookmooch had about 25,000 active members. If bookmooch had 2.5 million active members, this means that the charities would get about a million books a year, assuming that 2% of members points are donated. If bookmooch members get a little more generous and donate even a mere four points a year, with a million members this means ten million books given to libraries and therefore available to those who really need them but cannot get them elsewhere.

The crucial fact is that the bookmooch charity libraries can order precisely the books they want: They can select ANY of the half million books listed on bookmooch.

There are about 50 million people living at or under the poverty line right now, 50 million people who can't afford books and who are dependent on libraries. An extra million books a year will not completely close the access-to-books gap, but it will be a big help, especially because they will be the books these libraries need for their members.

And now the advantage to you: You get to clean up your home library. As you children and grandchildren get older, you can give away all those wonderful children's books to libraries so that children of poverty can enjoy them just as much as the children in your family did. You can give away that extra copy of that Jane Austin novel that has been on your shelf for ten years, or that popular romance or spy novel that you know you don't want to reread.

You also will have the satisfaction of knowing that your book will go to somebody who wants that particular book, and you have made a donation to a real charity, which means a modest deduction.

Finally, as a bookmooch member, you will have access to a lot of books you might want or need at very very low cost.

PS: I got on bookmooch because I read light fiction in other languages, mostly German and French. Other bookswap groups I looked at are not international. Bookmooch keeps me well-supplied. Light fiction is an easy, pleasant way to not only keep your competence but actually improve when native speakers are not around (and even when they are).