

The Library Ends Late Fees, and the Treasures Roll In

The decision in New York City set off a wave of returns, accompanied by bashful notes of apology and gratitude.

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Some items, checked out decades ago, arrived with apologetic notes. “Enclosed are books I have borrowed and kept in my house for 28-50 years! I am 75 years old now and these books have helped me through motherhood and my teaching career,” one patron wrote in an unsigned letter that accompanied a box of books dropped off at the New York Public Library’s main branch last fall. “I’m sorry for living with these books so long. They became family.”

Three DVD copies of “[The Boondock Saints II: All Saints Day](#),” a 2009 action film about Irish Catholic vigilantes in Boston that has a 23 percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes, were returned to three libraries in three different boroughs.

When New York’s public library systems announced last October that they would be eliminating all late fines, the goal was to get books and people back to the more than 200 branches, as well as research centers, across the city after a year and a half of limited hours and access.

The goal was achieved: A wave of returned overdue materials came crashing in, accompanied by a healthy increase (between 9 and 15 percent, depending on the borough) of returning visitors.

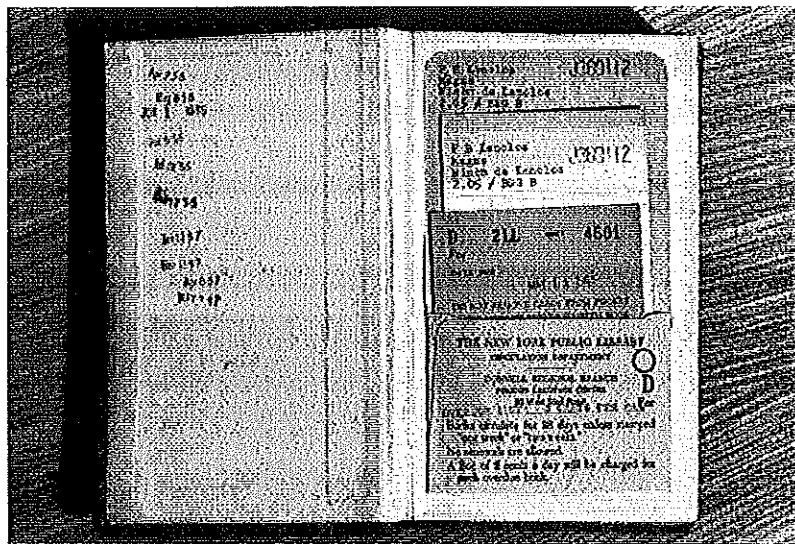
Since last fall, more than 21,000 overdue or lost items have been returned in Manhattan, Staten Island and the Bronx, some so old that they were no longer in the library’s systems. About 51,000 items were returned in Brooklyn between Oct. 6 through the end of February. And more than 16,000 were returned in Queens. (Libraries are still charging replacement fees for lost books.)

Some books were checked out so long ago that they had to be returned to different addresses. In December, Flushing Library in Queens received a package containing “Goodbye, Mr. Chips,” a novella by the English novelist James Hilton, that had been checked out in July 1970 from an [address](#) that is now associated with a shopping plaza.

Billy Parrott, who runs the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library in Midtown, the city’s largest circulating branch, said that most overdue items are returned by mail or book drop, rather than in person. This makes sense: Late books can be a source of shame. But librarians insist they aren’t judging.

“We just care about the books,” said Mr. Parrott, who has worked for the New York Public Library, one of three systems in the city (the others are in Brooklyn and Queens) since 2004.

Before the change in policy, New York’s public libraries had charged overdue fines since [the late 1800s](#). Early on, the rate was 1 cent per day. In 1954, it increased to 2 cents, then [5 cents](#) in 1959. The most recent rate was 25 cents a day in New York City (except for Brooklyn, where it was 15 cents) for most materials, 10 cents a day for children’s books and a couple of dollars a day for DVDs. (Fines were lower for patrons ages 65 and up and those with disabilities.)



One recently returned book was last checked out in 1965. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

After 30 days, a book would be deemed lost and a replacement fee would be charged. Fines didn't accrue forever, but anyone owing \$15 or more in fees would be blocked from checking out materials. In 2019, the New York, Brooklyn and Queens Public Libraries collected more than \$3 million in late fees, according to Angela Montefinise, the vice president of communications and marketing for the New York Public Library.

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When Tony Marx joined the New York Public Library as president in 2011, it was his mission, he said, to eliminate fines for good. Amnesty programs were put in place and, in Brooklyn, a study was conducted on the effectiveness of fines and the barriers that patrons faced in returning books.

Then, in 2017, the public library in Nashville eliminated fines, and those in Chicago, Dallas and San Francisco followed two years later. It wasn't until the pandemic hit, and fines were temporarily suspended in New York, that Mr. Marx saw a clear opportunity to change the city's system permanently.

"We learned that we could adjust our budget to do everything we needed to do and cover the lost revenue, because we're not in the revenue-generating business," Mr. Marx, a former president of Amherst College, said in an interview. "We are not in the fine-collection business. We're in the encouraging-to-read-and-learn business, and we were getting in our own way."

For some city residents, the fines had been particularly discouraging. Dominique Gomillion said she stopped going to her library in Jamaica, Queens, after books she had taken out for her 8-year-old daughter, Ariel, left her with more than \$50 in late fees — a substantial sum for her as a single parent.

"It's just me and her," Ms. Gomillion, a 32-year-old supervisor at UPS, said in a phone interview. "There's not really much other support that we have."



Dominique Gomillion and her daughter, Ariel, recently began visiting libraries again. They had stopped after accruing more than \$50 in late fees. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

A few months ago, Ms. Gomillion tried another library, the South Hollis branch, to see if she could clear her name.

"I was already ready to put the books back," she said. "And then Reggie came, the librarian, and he was like, 'I got something better for you.' And then he was like, 'There are no late fees anymore.'"

Ms. Montefinise recalled one patron at a branch in Dongan Hills, Staten Island, who, upon returning some late children's books, couldn't believe the news and asked for a receipt to show his wife as proof.

"I can't tell you how stressed out these fines made our customers," said Tienya Smith, a librarian who runs the branch in Long Island City, Queens. "Not having these fees erases all of that."