

THE LIFE OF A **BOOK** EXCHANGE

BY ANDREA JANSEN

When my husband Ken and I arrived in Boqueron in 1998 after a grueling cruise from Florida, we wandered around until we came to a local institution called Galloway's. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven: I understood the language, could visualize the food as I perused the menu, and a small book exchange was tucked in a corner. Welcome to Puerto Rico!

Continuing toward Salinas, we were forced by a storm to make landfall early and stopped in the fishing village of La Parguera, complete with a small strip mall. Coming on the heels of Galloway's, I declared my cruising days were over. Amiable Ken, assessing my mental state, relented and in short order he had built and opened a small kite shop on the grounds of the mall.

I have always acknowledged that while I live on a boat, I am not a boater. Boaters are capable individuals who handle hooks, lines and sinkers with aplomb. When First Mates proudly give their tours, I am particularly impressed with their storage compartments: everything in its proper place. Not on *Ruff Life*, our 33-foot trawler. Organizing is not one of my skills, and I am constantly crying, "Get it off the boat!"

Dismal TV choices had us cherishing whatever books we could lay our hands on. With the kite shop situated in the heart of the community, it was easy for people to pass Ken their old books, which of course came on board. At first I was thrilled, but then the quantity became silly and I issued my favorite demand.


'to heck with this' (I'm editing) and left them on the sidewalk. That evening there was a terrible thunderstorm and I became remorseful, wondering how to explain his ruined library to Ken. The next morning I went in and was shocked to see that the books were just fine. The overhang had protected them. From then on, the crates remained outside.

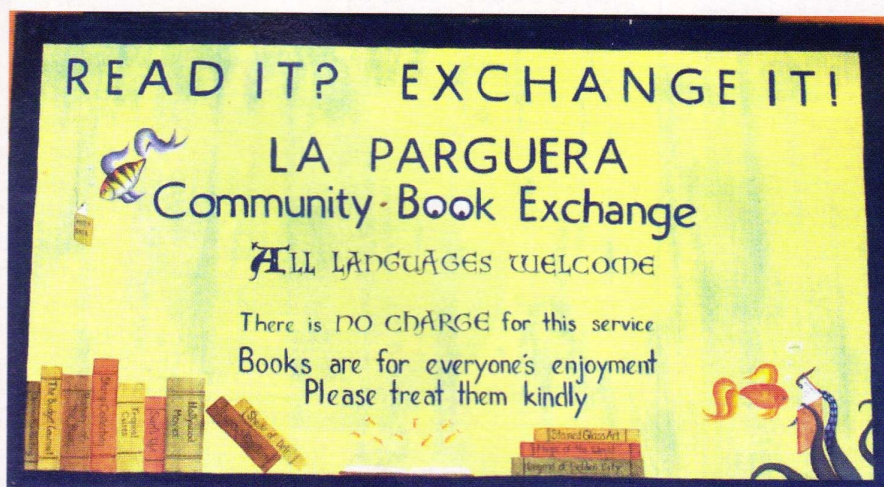
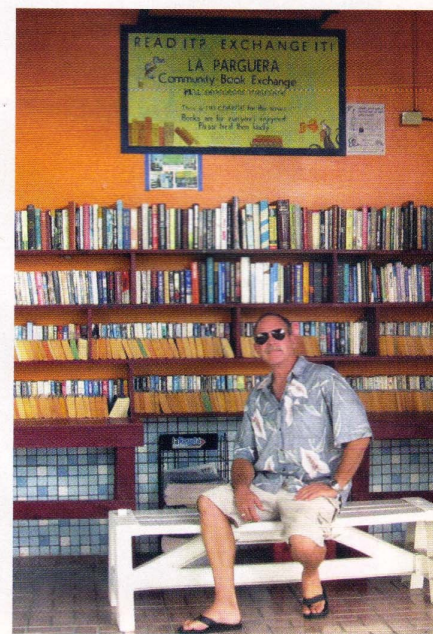
A funny thing happened. We discovered that books would come and go during the night—apparently having someone nearby was too intimidating. Over the years the exchange grew. When the mall owner

built permanent shops, he included an outdoor space dedicated to the book exchange. I painted a sign and it has been thriving ever since.

The exchange is free...all that's asked is that the books be treated with respect. There are times when someone gets a bit piggy, but the majority appreciates and respects this gift to the community. Ken methodically cleans and categorizes his pet project, and while he repeatedly complains, "Too many romance novels," I know the ladies of Parguera are thrilled.

We worried that the exchange might fall to ruin once we left. That theory was tested these past months while Ken has been stateside assisting with family matters. I take a few moments to pick up the trash and return books to their shelves but, all in all, it has been well maintained. Perhaps not to Ken's specifications, but by now it's taken on a life of its own.

The shops have changed over the years but the book exchange remains, beckoning readers of all languages. Thank you, Ken, for creating this marvelous exchange. I kinda miss those milk crates. 



The books were transferred to a milk crate and kept outside the kiosk during the day and inside at night. Eventually the crates increased to the point where Ken posted a sign, "Book Exchange", which most people ignored.

One week when Ken was stateside, I womanned the shop, dutifully dragging the crates back and forth. On one particularly bad day (as in 'crabby'), I shut the shop, realized I'd forgotten the books, thought

Andrea Jansen is a certified Artesana, a title reserved for artists who, using materials indigenous to Puerto Rico, capture the island's rich culture. She lives aboard Ruff Life, a 33-foot trawler.