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# HOW A CITY IN FRANCE GOT THE WORLD'S FIRST SHORT-STORY VENDING MACHINES

BY PAULINE BOCK

*The city of Grenoble, France, is testing the first models of a local startup's short-story vending machine.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAULINE BOCK



**W**hen Jess Mateychuk entered the tourism office in Grenoble, France, he wasn't looking for information about the city. "I finally found them!" the twenty-one-year-old exchange student from Winnipeg, Canada, said with excitement. He was referring to the city's recent cultural innovation turned Internet hit: a black and orange, rocket-looking cylinder that spits out short stories, free of charge.

Under a glass panel labelled "Distributeur d'histoires courtes" ("Short-story distributor"), he found three numbered buttons: one, three, and five. The numbers refer to how many minutes a story will take to read. Jess chose three. The button flickered and a long ticket—a bit like a supermarket receipt, but on thicker paper—slipped out. "Chambre avec vue, by Blandine Butelle," the top of the sheet announced. It was a fictional dialog between two pensioners. ("I'm telling you he's not snoring anymore!" "Come on, Jacqueline, that doesn't mean he's dead!" it begins.) Mateychuk printed more stories, "for later," as William Haettel, an employee in the tourism office, looked on. "Improbable things have happened since we got these," he said. "Italian tourists have taken selfies with them. They work incredibly well, and it's not even peak season." Ten minutes later, the machine was out of paper.

There are currently eight short-story distributors in Grenoble, a city of a hundred and sixty thousand in the French Alps. Last October, the local publishing startup Short Edition launched the prototypes at city hall, the tourism office, and in libraries and social centers. Those who wish to host the machines can rent them from the company, for five hundred euros a month, but Grenoble got their machines at a discount: funds from the city council and the regional government helped to fund the development of the prototype. Locals queuing to return a book or to meet with a councilor are now invited to print and read one of the six hundred original stories provided by the machines. In the first month, about ten thousand stories were printed. "The written word isn't dead," Christophe Sibieude, the co-founder and head of Short Edition, said, as he put on glasses tinged with fluorescent blue and green and looked down at his smartphone. Sibieude believes that these machines offer something that the text-providing gadgets in our pockets do not. "Smartphones have blurred the limits between our professional life and our distractions," he said. "The paper format provides a break from omnipresent screens. People may not have reacted so strongly to our vending machines six years ago, when smartphones hadn't become essential to all parts of our lives yet."

France is a nation of writers: in 2013, a poll by the research firm Ifop found that seventeen per cent of the country's population had written a manuscript of one kind or another, most of them unpublished. Short Edition, which currently has a staff of eleven, has offered a free publishing platform for amateur writers since 2011. The company's Web site and app have published stories by nearly ten thousand authors, at a rate of roughly a hundred a day. A user base of around a hundred and forty thousand people then vote for the best stories, some of which become e-books, audiobooks, or old-fashioned printed books, in partnerships with larger companies, such as Orange and Butagaz. Now the most popular stories will also find their way into the vending machines.

The system is very competitive, Xavier Bray, an author who has had a story make it into the machines, told me. His story "La Forme" is a comical piece about a father who has taken up exercising and tries to explain to his young daughter why he needs to get back "into shape." ("But, Dad, I like your current shape. I don't want you to change it," she says.) Bray, who lives in Grenoble, had been publishing short stories on Facebook for a few years when he heard about Short Edition. "It formalized a hobby," he said. Authors receive ten per cent of the rent paid to Short Edition, a rate that's comparable to French standards in book publishing.

Sibieude and his co-founder, Quentin Pleplé, told me that they first had the idea for the machines one afternoon in 2013. They were taking a break in the hall of their office building, buying a snack from a vending machine. One of them—they don't recall which one—said that the vending machines should offer short stories instead of drinks and candy. They had a prototype by 2014. "Our clients' eyes would light up when we would make them try it," Sibieude recalled. He's kept the original machine. "The 3 button is broken and the fonts are wrong ... But it's the very first one."

After the machines had their public debut, in October, the international reaction stunned Sibieude and Pleplé. On a wall in their office is a world map covered in small silver stars: one for each article that's been published about the machines. "Brazil, Turkey, Australia, Germany, Korea," Manon Landeau, the company's communications manager, enumerated. At the time of my visit, two hundred and thirty articles had been written about the machines, in thirty-eight countries. "We didn't think there would be such an enthusiasm." "It sure entertains, our toy!" Sibieude added. A small series of the machines has now gone into local production for four French clients. One of them, a gas-station company, is considering an order in the hundreds, Sibieude told me. Hospitals, train stations, airports, amusement parks, museums, and cinemas have also expressed interest.

For now, at least, Grenoble remains the only place you can find the machines. The city's Green Party mayor, Eric Piolle, told me that he saw them as a way to provide culture to Grenoble's citizens. A longtime anti-consumerist, Piolle earned national headlines in 2014 when he banned advertisements on Grenoble's streets. To him, the short story distributors provide another "tie between the people and the city."

"Imagination and the written word have returned in public spaces in recent years," the architect and urbanist Corinne Langlois said, when I asked her about the machines. She cited a 2014 project in Toulouse, which invited residents to write down their wishes and hang the notes on Christmas trees. The popular practice of printing poems on the walls of subway cars—first done in London, in 1986, and later in Paris, New York, and elsewhere—is another precedent. "The distributor answers a need for daydream moments in an extremely organized urban space," Langlois said. Béatrice Mariolle, another urbanist, also liked the idea. "The short story, as an individual message, settles the reader in a broader metropolitan system: a tiny project linked to a myriad of other tiny projects, in other places."

Grenoble's tourism office already has a few regulars. "Some come twice a week just to print a story," the tourism guide Carlota Iborra-Gomez said. Marjorie Naddeo, a librarian at Grenoble's central library, said that she has found short-story tickets used as bookmarks. Short Edition hopes that the machines will make their way across the globe. They have received requests, they said, from a high school in Tunisia, a festival on Australia's Gold Coast, and chain short-story tickets used as bookmarks. Short Edition hopes that the machines will make their way across the globe. They have received requests, they said, from a high school in Tunisia, a festival on Australia's Gold Coast, and chain stores in the United States. Ten companies and institutions are currently testing one or several machines. Although Sibieude emphasizes Short Edition's attachment to Francophone literature, English-language versions would be necessary to fulfill some of their big dreams. An influential Hollywood director is talking with them about creating an American version of the machines and will test one in the coming months. Sibieude, who last visited New York in 1989, recalled long lines in coffee shops. "Imagine a distributor in every Starbucks," he said.

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