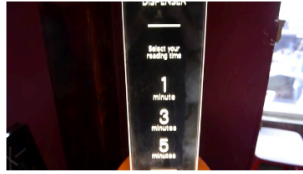


# It's lit: Short-story dispensers bring free fiction to West Palm Beach



The dispensers spit out short stories to the public at the press of a button.

By **Phillip Valys** • Contact Reporter  
SouthFlorida.com



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**K**evin Russell craved some literature along with his coffee on a recent Wednesday at Subculture Coffee in West Palm Beach. So, over the din of indie-pop and a whirring French press, Russell smacked a button on the café's newest machine: a tall, black-and-orange cylinder called a short-story dispenser.

The button blinked, and Russell, a Subculture regular, waited as a long sheet of paper shot from a slot midway down the cylinder: "The Chess Players, by Arthur M.," the sheet read, followed by a short story about Maimonid and Bernard, longtime friends who grouse about soccer and play chess in a Parisian café.

"This reminds me of those ancient Roman scrolls, like I'm about to read the emperor's law," the West Palm Beach resident says, gripping each end of the sheet, which stretched 3 feet long.

Since May at Subculture, a trendy java spot on Clematis Street, coffee drinkers and readers have nibbled on the dispenser's free short stories along with their muffins. The dispenser, a 4-foot-tall, podium-like device, was created by Short Édition, a French nonprofit publishing house that has installed 140 dispensers around the world. (More than 70,000 stories are stored on each dispenser's hard drive.)

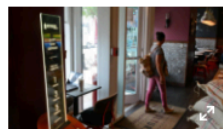


The short-story dispenser, a podium-like device, is now in use in West Palm Beach to dispense free literature. (Jim Rassol / Sun Sentinel)

Three of them — the first dispensers in Florida — are in West Palm Beach, thanks to the city's Downtown Development Authority (cost: \$8,000 apiece). After two months of testing the dispenser's popularity at Subculture, two more short-story dispensers will be installed next week downtown, including at E.R. Bradley's Saloon on Clematis Street, and a third to-be-announced location.

So far, the free literature has been a hit, says Teneka James, associate director of the city's Downtown Development Authority. The Subculture dispenser has been used more than 1,600 times, James says.

"Oftentimes, people only see our arts-and-culture scene as only having music and murals, but writing is an art form, too," James says. "Having more than 70,000 stories at your fingertips was very enticing to us. Plus, the stories are totally random. You don't know if you're going to get mystery or horror or whatever."



Press a button on the dispenser — a 4-foot-tall, podium-like device — and a story of one, three or five minutes in length will print out. (Jim Rassol / Sun Sentinel)

The dispenser has three buttons — "1," "3" and "5" — which indicate how many minutes it takes to read each story. Stories are printed on thick, grocery receipt-style paper. A five-minute opus, for example, looks like a \$200 Publix shopping slip.

The stories are hardly at the level of Proust, Tolstoy or Vonnegut. Loic Giraut, an employee of Short Édition,

says stories are first submitted by French writers, then vetted by a team of authors. The stories are then translated into English. Only five dispensers exist in the United States, including at Francis Ford Coppola's Café Zoetrope in San Francisco. (A fan of the short-story form, Coppola began an award-winning literary magazine, Zoetrope: All-Story, in 1997.)

"We want [people] to see this story as a gift made for them," Giraut says. "Our hope is that, if they like the experience and want to renew it, they can hit the button for another story."



Two more short-story dispensers will be installed in downtown West Palm Beach next week, including at E.R. Bradley's Saloon on Clematis Street. (Jim Rassol / Sun Sentinel)

So far, the short-story dispenser has lured plenty of Subculture regulars and first-timers, says barista Jackson Hart, of West Palm Beach. The 23-year-old says he's spotted customers reading the stories aloud to one another, sometimes in mock-serious tones, or trading sheets with other drinkers.

"People love it, because I think a lot of the stories are unexpected," Hart says. "A

coffee shop is a perfect place for this, because people are just hanging out and might need something to read."

The stories can be a mixed bag. Rachel Torrico, a Subculture barista, says she needed a pick-me-up after a tiring workday. Instead, she read "Dismal Early Morning," which includes the line, "I finally manage to leave my home and face the street and the ugly faces of my fellow creatures, some still puffy with sleep, others pale as if a vampire had emptied them of their blood."

"I think everyone who submits stories for this machine are all depressed," Torrico, of West Palm Beach, says, prompting a chuckle from her co-worker Natalie Scott. "It was sad, like, the world-is-going-to-explode-and-we're-all-going-to-die sad. I just wanted a happy story."

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To promote interest in the dispensers, James says the West Palm Beach DDA plans to open up story submissions to local residents as soon as

this December.

"People are definitely enjoying it because it's free literature, but we want the local community to have their say," James says.

The short-story dispensers are on display at these locations:

Subculture Coffee, 509 Clematis St, West Palm Beach; 561-318-5142 or [SubcultureCoffee.com](#)

E.R. Bradley's Saloon, 104 N. Clematis St., West Palm Beach; 561-833-3520 or [ERBradleys.com](#)