

The Game's Afoot

In letterboxing, players search for clues, leave their marks

Phil Kloer - Staff

Go past the granite marker with a red arrow, across the railroad tracks, alongside the stone wall, across the road, down the winding dirt path, around the boulder on the right, up to the pine tree. Reach into the hole in the rotting log nearby and Bingo! There it is, a little Tupperware container.

On the lid is written, "This is not trash! This is a letterbox."

Letterboxing is like treasure hunting for a treasure with no intrinsic value. The idea is to follow clues posted on the Internet (which range from easy to diabolically hard) and find boxes that other letterboxers have hidden. It's a small but rapidly growing subculture of hobbyists in metro Atlanta and scattered worldwide, who sing the praises of hiking outdoors, participating as a family and solving a puzzle.

"You get exercise. You get a nice view. You complete a quest," says Mark Britt, 32, of Stone Mountain.

"My husband calls it hiking with purpose," says Beverly Matoney, who home schools her two children in Alpharetta. "I'd get out and walk in the woods anyway, but this is a treasure at the end of a hike. It's definitely something for the whole family."

Britt and Matoney will be among the first gathering of letterboxers in Georgia today at Stone Mountain Park. More than 50 letterboxers from nine states are expected to attend, and they'll be scouring the park for the 10 boxes hidden there. More than 100 letterboxes are hidden around Georgia, from one near the Newton County Courthouse in Covington to one near Emory University. But Stone Mountain Park has the highest concentration of letterboxes in the state.

Most of the people attending the gathering have never met but have corresponded through e-mail. Although letterboxing itself is a somewhat solitary pursuit, hobbyists connect on the Internet, sometimes forming online communities in places like Yahoo Groups.

"This might not exist if not for the Internet," says Britt, who edits catalogs for an automotive restoration company but calls letterboxing, "almost like a second job, but one you don't get paid for."

Letterboxing is about more than hunting. Most letterboxers create their own hand-carved rubber stamps (some buy them in stores, but that's considered less classy) and make their own personalized logbooks. When a box is found, it will have its own unique stamp and book inside. The finder prints his or her own personal stamp into the box's book, then adds the stamp from the box to his or her logbook. Then the box is resealed and carefully returned to its hiding place for the next person to find.

Leafing through a letterbox's book, which may be the size of a deck of cards or a paperback book, reveals a history of everyone who has been there, using their "trail names": Silent Doug, She Who Plants, Poison Ivy, Psycho Mommy, Amyrica, Town Crier. Some homemade stamps are simple; some are like little masterpieces of folk art.

There's no competition in letterboxing per se, but there is certainly prestige for finding or planting lots of boxes. Finding 100 boxes is generally considered a milestone.

"Some people are famous, because they've found so many boxes," says Mike Fairman, a Salvation Army administrator from Loganville. "When you see a stamp like 'Wanda & Pete,' it's like seeing an autograph of someone famous."

Fairman and his family's immersion into letterboxing is typical. He and his wife, Carol, heard about the activity in late

December. Three days later, they tramped through more than 11 miles of trails in Stone Mountain Park, collecting and stamping.

"We were hooked," says Carol Fairman. "At 35, I never would have seen myself running through a cornfield to get a stamp."

Letterboxing is said to have begun in 1854, when James Perrott hid his calling card in a bottle near a pool in Devon, England, inviting others to add their cards. Eventually, people began leaving postcards ("letterbox" is the British word for our "mailbox"), although there appears to be a long interval between Perrott and the revival of letterboxing in England in the 1980s and '90s. An article in Smithsonian Magazine in 1998 seems to have jumped letterboxing to North America, and while the Northeast and Pacific Northwest regions were stronger at first, now the South is playing catch-up.

Unlike many activities, letterboxing has no organization or association. There are no rules, although there is a system of etiquette that includes caring for other people's boxes and not damaging nature.

As a result, there's no way to know how many people are into letterboxing. Britt guesses there might be no more than 100 in metro Atlanta, but the number of boxes and hunters is growing rapidly.

"In January, there were 38 letterboxes in Georgia, and now there's over 100," says Britt.

There's a fair amount of ambivalence about the activity becoming widespread and attracting masses of new hunters because of the respect and care needed to protect the system of hiding and finding.

"It's starting to really blow up," says Fairman. "When it's a small number of people, you can trust them. But the more people you have, the less trust you have."