Many good books go undiscovered, unopened, unread. I would call this a Lack-of-Strangers Danger. A strange book enlarges my world more than an online book search ever can.

When I was a child, I had open access to vast shelves of books at my local libraries. My favorite multistoried library filled an entire block. It was open from 6 a.m. until at least 10 p.m. Even though I frequently browsed the shelves before school and after work, I felt I would never come to the end of it. And new books appeared all the time. No matter where I wandered down aisles and into alcoves, books on topics I’d never thought about demanded to come home with me, called out to be read. Books seemed to jump off the shelves into my hands or summoned me from distant racks. I read about everything from deep-sea pearl diving to the invention of the Dvorak keyboard. One particular librarian at the Hill Street Branch liked to tell me about books she enjoyed. I had the feeling she’d read every book in her branch of the library. She even convinced me to try holding my breath underwater, like the deep-sea pearl divers.

When I moved to Philadelphia, that changed. While the central library in the system is one of the biggest libraries in the world, only a small fraction of the books sit on browsable shelves. These are mostly popular books, and books that have been made into movies. Movies, too, are on the shelves. Random discovery became difficult, but not impossible. Various rooms in the library, like the history room and the rare book room have browsable shelves holding books I’ve never seen before, along with Charles Dickens’s raven (now stuffed) that inspired Edgar Allen Poe’s poem. Just not as many browsable books as I was used to. Some librarians still like to chat and tell me about their favorite books in backroom storage. I know it’s eccentric to read as randomly as I do. And I don’t know why I walk by some books and not others. But there’s something magical about the freedom to meet a new book based on a chance encounter.

Newspapers and magazines used to pay book reviewers. Now writers and publishers pay them. Thus, despite the fact that more books than ever are being published, fewer books are being reviewed.

A computer system in my new library allows book searches, which I suppose makes my shoes last longer—but I have to type a keyword to see the titles on a specific selected subject. No more just walking down an aisle and feeling the urge to pick up an inviting book. The only way to obtain the multitudes of hidden books is to present a staff member with a...
call number. Many good books go undiscovered, unopened, unread. I would call this a Lack-of-Strangers Danger. A strange book enlarges my world more than an online book search ever can.

Then came Covid-19. No more conversations with librarians. No more browsing shelves. As I write this in early 2022, I’m faced with interacting only with the library database, accessible online, where I can reserve books for pickup during regular work hours. It’s hard to guess what keywords might bring me an unexpected treasure. And it’s hard to get to the library during work hours. (We all work the same hours.) Covid-19 isn’t just killing our families and friends. It is also killing our access to books.

Covid-19 has also made it easier to find groups of like-minded people on the Web. This facilitates both book banning and book clubs. A member of a group with a specific focus may find a book offensive and get the entire group (which has not read it) to campaign to ban that book. Book banning is treason. But treason makes headlines. And headlines make sales for those controversial books.

Meanwhile a book may become a favorite of a book club because one member falls in love with it. The leaders in both these types of groups (the hate groups and the booklovers) are influencers, typically on social media, who develop a reputation and then often charge fees to even consider recommending a book. Book popularity has thus become something for sale. Newspapers and magazines used to pay book reviewers. Now writers and publishers pay them. Thus, despite the fact that more books than ever are being published, fewer books are being reviewed. And fewer still are reviewed in the
Lois is a former high school chemistry teacher and former head science teacher at Science in the City Summer Camp in Philadelphia. She has also been an adjunct science teacher at the University of South Florida. Since retiring, she continues to take science classes. Her class in Forensic Biology led to Little Red, The Detective, in which Red is studying fingerprint identification, so she can tell that “Grandma” isn’t who she says she is. Lois has taken so many science classes that she believes science is the solution to almost every problem, including the dilemmas in fairy tales. She has invented what she calls Science Folktales. In each science-based tale, the protagonist achieves a better ending than the original because of learning scientific principles. She has turned some of these tales into plays. She has also created a series of Mermaid Science stories, which make use of water science. Lois is married to the love of her life. She has two children, four grandchildren and a dog.

Zillions of books, old and new, are dying because nobody knows they exist.

Libraries would help the curious find out more about the world. And more books would be reviewed. But the problems are far deeper than inaccessible library stacks, banned books, and Covid–19 closures.

Thanks to the Covid–19 necessity to minimize random socializing, combined with narrow-interest online groups, I’m seeing a lack of curiosity about books that aren’t bestsellers. The random book discovery method of my childhood is gone. Furthermore, the random encounter with people of differing opinions is minimized.

I am an Indie author of middle-grade and picture books. I don’t want to pay influencers to push my books. I don’t want to pay Publishers Weekly or Kirkus Reviews the $400 fee they charge to look at Indie books. (They review big publishers’ titles for free.) I’m sure my books have a bigger audience than they have currently found. I can’t use the old methods of doing a reading at a library (which is closed for Covid–19) or having somebody randomly discover my book on a shelf that nobody can look at.

Zillions of books, old and new, are dying because nobody knows they exist. This is one of the many deaths from Covid–19. I don’t have answers. I’m hoping that pointing out the problem will inspire new thinking. This has to be a solvable problem.