

Bryant Park offers reading material

Books, magazines available in Manhattan green space



Display offers a sampling of the reading material that's available in Bryant Park. (Baltimore Sun photo by Susan Reimer / September 1, 2009)

By Susan Reimer
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NEW YORK -- You can picnic in a park, walk in a park or sleep in a park. You can also read in a park, but it is the rare park that provides the reading material for you.

One that does is Bryant Park, a little gem of green space in the heart of Manhattan where the skyscrapers provide shade.

Those who restored the park to its innocence in the 1990s after a long, dark period of disrepair and disrepute also restored its Depression-era role as a reading park.

Bryant Park is located between 40th and 42nd streets and Fifth Avenue and Avenue of the Americas, in the shadow of the New York Public Library.

During the 1930s and until **World War II** restored full employment, librarians used to come to the park with carts of books, newspapers and magazines and the jobless could spend their days reading. There were few other places for them to go.

The librarians distributed reading material behind a table and under a large umbrella every day but Sunday. If it rained, they would scurry back into the library with their books.

Today, there are children's books, magazines and a collection of classics donated for the reading pleasure of Bryant Park guests. In addition, readers drop off used books to share. Volunteer attendants maintain the reading area and cover the books at night and in bad weather.

But reading isn't the only thing that goes on in Bryant Park, which was renamed in 1884 for poet, newspaper editor and civic reformer William Cullen Bryant and was rescued from disuse the first time in the 1930s by **Robert Moses**, New York City's powerful parks commissioner.

The six-acre park is designed in the classic French garden style, with a football-field-sized lawn surrounded by formal gardens and gravel pathways. There are also tables to accommodate a sizable lunchtime crowd as well as Le Carrousel, a carousel for children, that was specially designed to fit the park's French inspiration - the animals prance to French cabaret music.

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In addition, the field is used for everything from sunbathing to mega yoga classes to seating for summer evening movies on a giant screen at one end. The modern louvered screen, which opens during the day to allow the city to see the park, and vice versa, is in sharp contrast to the ornate and restored restrooms at the opposite end, which date from the earliest days of the centuries-old park.

Another modern take on the park is the semiannual Fashion Week, where designers present their seasonal wares in huge white tents set up on the lawn for the occasion. This week, designers and models from all over the globe are converging on the park to show off their spring 2010 collections. The event is so big that it has outgrown the park and will relocate next year.

It is estimated that more than 20,000 people visit the park on a summer day, but even on a Saturday afternoon, it feels restful. There are people playing chess and a clown entertaining children, but the park has an almost reverential quiet.

The Reading Room, as it is called, is located in a section of the formal gardens on the 42nd Street side of the park - the sunny side. It is set off by an allee of London plane trees, huge urns planted with seasonal flowers and a half-dozen beds planted with hundreds of bulbs, annuals, perennials and shrubs.

The Bryant Park Corp., created by the Rockefellers brothers to oversee the park, issues pamphlets and has prepared a Web site that gives gardening enthusiasts a detailed list of all the plantings (bryantpark.org/the-grounds/gardens.php).

Bryant Park is a gardener's dream, a reader's refuge and a leafy oasis in the heart of the city.