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Business, Pleasure Mix on Book Networking Sites

By Marc Schultz -- Publishers Weekly, 7/9/2007 1:56:00 PM



With the Internet's tendency to splinter trends into increasingly narrow niches, it's inevitable that social networking sites like **MySpace**, **Gather** and **YouTube** would beget countless topic-specific variations. More than 30 of these second-generation social networking sites have sprung up around books, serving as an online gathering place for hundreds of thousands of avid readers—and providing an attractive venue for publishers who want to reach these potential customers.

Online retailers Amazon and Abebooks have both shown an interest in the sites, making substantial investments in them. So far publishers have done little to try to exploit the sites, though that may be about to change. The most popular of these sites, **LibraryThing.com**, has just announced a program by which publishers can supply some of its members with ARCs of forthcoming books.

Serving as virtual libraries, sites like LibraryThing, **Shelfari.com** and **GoodReads.com** give readers an online place to meet, discuss and—most significantly for publishers—list all the books in their life: ones they own, ones they've read and ones they want to read. LibraryThing.com has more than 200,000 users, each with an average of 70 books on his or her shelf, giving book publishers a highly useful market research tool.



LibraryThing founder Tim Spalding and online used and rare bookseller **AbeBooks.com** have struck a 60-40 partnership. LibraryThing gets access to AbeBooks's resources, expertise and marketing to enrich its site, while AbeBooks receives monthly bundles of aggregate and anonymous data from LibraryThing (e.g., a 50-year-old woman in Connecticut likes Richard Russo).

Another site, Shelfari, got a \$1 million investment from fellow Seattle firm Shelfari earlier this year. While both companies declined to discuss terms of the investment, Amazon is now the only online retailer listed on the site, while other sites include links to a number of Internet booksellers.

Book publishers, though, have been slow to participate. They may, however, be interested in LibraryThing's Early Reviewers program, which launched last month and uses the site to match Random House ARCs with readers likely to enjoy them, in hopes of generating word-of-mouth publicity. One thousand users have signed up for the program so far. Come October, the program will be open to all publishers.

Most shelving sites work the same way: users create a free account, list their books, label them with descriptive tags, ratings and/or reviews, and the resulting "bookshelf" is available for other users to peruse. The biggest sites are LibraryThing, which according to Internet ratings service **Quantcast.com** has 218,112 unique monthly users; GoodReads, with 15,192; and Shelfari, with 9,898. The differences between those sites and others, like **Bookswellread.com**, **Revish.com** and **WhatsOnMyBookshelf.com**, are in the details: most sites feature bulletin-board book discussions; some let users link profiles with "friends"; and many boast unique features, including recommendation engines, book groups and downloadable "widgets," tools for users to post samples of their virtual shelves on private sites or blogs.

All these features are available to any publisher who opens an account. The discussion boards alone offer innumerable opportunities to target a group of consumers with a specific interest (say, every user who has Jim Crace's *Pesthouse* on his or her shelf). But so far, the handful of publishers with accounts appear to be restricting their activities to simply creating bookshelves on their profiles for current and upcoming titles. Early adopters at Shelfari include Fantagraphics (496 books logged) and Unbridled Books (26), and LibraryThing has attracted Bloomberg Press (143 books), and Northern California Authors & Publishers (147 books).

Soft Skull Press publisher Richard Nash has set up accounts on each of the three most popular sites, Shelfari, GoodReads and LibraryThing. "While the tendency in publishing is to focus on what's next, [these sites] can be oh-so-important for backlist," he said. "For Soft Skull, at least, there are folks who only came across us recently, and it would give us a chance to say to a Dennis Cooper fan, 'Dennis Cooper loved an early book of Douglas Martin's, *Outline of My Lover*. Can I send you a copy?'"

Advertising on these sites remains limited; GoodReads (which was founded by *LA Times* magnate Otis Chandler's grandson of the same name) makes limited use of Google ads, but neither LibraryThing nor Shelfari carries ads. Yet the sites continue to roll out new features. GoodReads has a "GoodReads Writing" section, emulating the successful MySpace Music model, in which users can post their own stories. LibraryThing has just signed its first brick-and-mortar libraries (Connecticut's Danbury Library among them) to its "LibraryThing for Libraries" spin-off site. And an altruistic group of LibraryThing's enthusiastic users voluntarily translated the site into eight languages and generated enough data to build AbeBooks a recommendation engine called BookHints, introduced in April, that's driven by readers' tastes—i.e., all the books on their shelf—rather than their purchases.

Here, *PW* presents a compare-and-contrast guide to the big three book shelving sites.

	Shelfari	GoodReads	LibraryThing
Founder/Corporate Investors/Monthly Estimated Users /Date Founded	Tastemakers, Inc. / Amazon / 9,898 / Oct 2006	Otis Chandler / none / 15,192 / Jan. 2007	Tim Spalding / AbeBooks / 218,112 / Aug. 2005
User Friendly?	Colorful, clearly laid-out pages make navigating, shelf-building and people-finding easy. Some features (private messaging, library export) are hard to find.	Bland-looking but easy-to-use layout allows users to build libraries quickly with one-click add & rate function. Multiple shelves separate current, past and future reads; like Shelfari, some features (e.g., widgets) require digging.	Welcoming, professional-looking, spreadsheet-style library display lets users change tags, ratings and other info rapidly. Works with UPC scanners, but link- and option-heavy system may overwhelm newbies; non-paying members limited to 200 titles.
Social Scene?	Personal home page tracks discussions on/users with your books, and groups ("Dog Lovers"; "Writing Readers") are easy to start and join, but there's no private messaging system.	The "meet people" page lists users who live nearby, are currently online or popular, and your personal homepage reports friends' updates. There are discussion boards and an on-site messaging system, but no groups to join.	Features data-rich profiles, numerous discussion groups to join ("Happy Heathens"; "Librarians who LibraryThing"); a personalized "watch list" keeps tabs on users and groups, but there's no "friend" or private message system.
The Owners' Take	"Publishers can benefit greatly by leveraging Shelfari's community and tools to create community discussion within their own online marketing experiences." -- Josh Hug	"We want the site experience to be both enjoyable and useful for anyone who comes to GoodReads. Advertising will come with time."-- Otis Chandler	"LibraryThing will be helping publishers to recruit early reviewers... with its detailed understanding of how books and members relate... it can match readers up to books." -- Tim Spalding
Industry Involvement	Fantagraphics, Soft Skull Press and Unbridled Books each have profiles; Unbridled started a group for Shelfari-using publishers (current membership: 10).	Currently boasts 125 authors among its members, including debut author Tao Lin, novelist Aimee Liu, legal thriller writer Tim Green and photographer Randy Leffingwell.	Random House is the first to participate in "Early Reviewers" program that matches upcoming titles with likely readers; titles offered include <i>Away</i> by Amy Bloom and <i>The River Wife</i> by Jonis Agee

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