

# SEARCHER

The Magazine for Database Professionals

## Hit Me With Your Best Doc

Document-Sharing Services on the Web

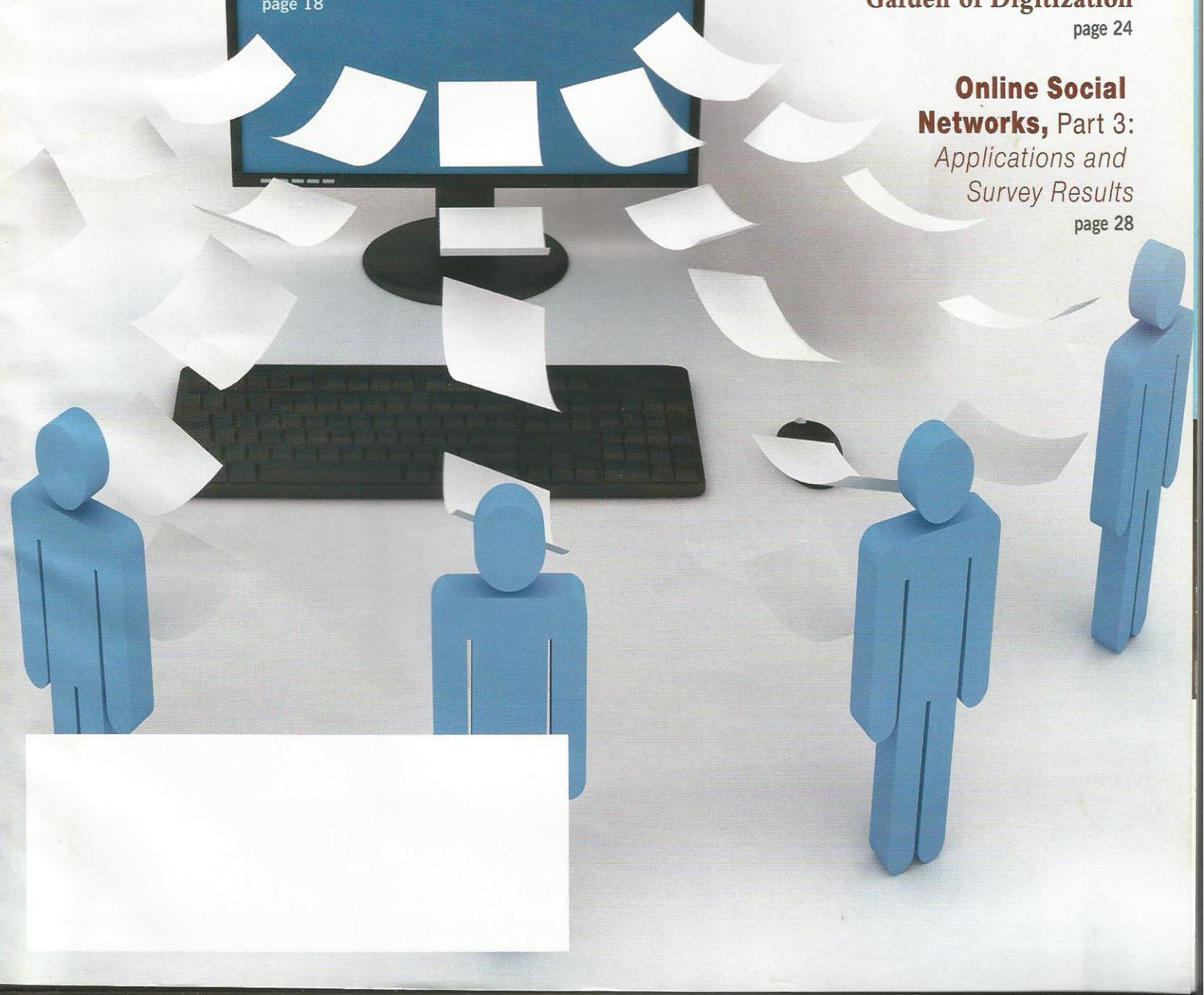
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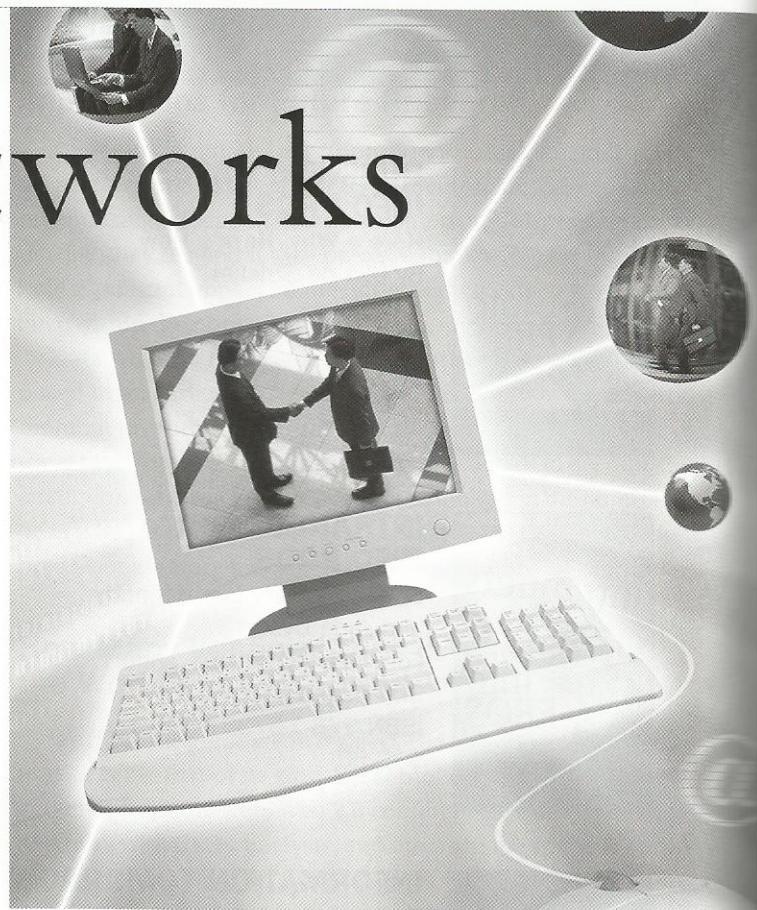
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# Social Networks

## Another Avenue to New Books and Friends

Last year, I reviewed book recommendation engines and praised LibraryThing highly because of its robust features [Webmastery: "LibraryThing.com: The Holy Grail of Book Recommendation Engines," July/August 2007, pp. 25-32]. Many of my friends thought LibraryThing interesting, but, to my surprise, not many used it regularly. Admittedly, I didn't go back to it often either, except to create a list for my book club's annual book selection meeting.



Recently a very good friend contacted me through GoodReads, a site I described as light on functionality and heavy on meeting and greeting. This friend had catalogued her entire book collection on GoodReads. After logging in and agreeing to become her "friend" on the GoodReads site, I get emails each time she uploads a new book along with her comments about them. I love these emails, as I don't have much time to see or talk with her and enjoy seeing what she's reading. I usually reply to her when I receive them and am rewarded with a brief update on her life. Today I received an update from GoodReads that showed why she enjoyed three books about dogs. None appealed to me. But, I knew my friend Wendy would flip for these books. So, I passed them along. She'd read two, but appreciated learning about the third. Again, I got the reward of a brief exchange and update on another friend's life, a gift I cherish in the midst of my crazy schedule.

In a separate incident, a friend in my child's playgroup recently invited me to become her friend on GoodReads. I like her and accepted her request. The emails that followed showed she was a voracious reader! I'd never thought to invite her to join my Book Club. I had no idea it would interest her.

This was good for me to see. While I tend to be a geek about search engine features and functionality, I had overlooked the benefits of the social aspects of sharing collections. With that in mind, I've added a few additional reviews below for more socially focused products. Still, LibraryThing remains a favorite of mine, so I've included an update for you on its new features as well. And LibraryThing is smart enough to know that while it may not build social aspects itself, it can partner with other applications to leverage its social network as well, and that is just what it's doing.

### GoodReads Re-Visited

I remember last year regretting having to write that GoodReads was "light on book-related functionality and heavy on meeting and greeting." I knew I was missing something but hadn't experienced what it was. Though I still don't find the GoodReads experience on the website compelling, I do like being connected to friends and getting updates about what they're reading. Like most book sites, GoodReads encourages its readers to mark their books in categories such as To Read, a Favorite, or Currently Reading. There's no solid, techie book recommendation engine here. Rec-

ommendations are all based on "what's popular," "what's being read," etc. You can Meet People by looking at the pictures of the books they like, seeing how many books they've read and how many friends they have. You can even narrow down those choices to people who live near you and check out Top Readers and/or Top Reviewers, visit Top Shelves, Book Shelved as Favorites — top 50, and see what your friends enjoy.

One of the first newsletters I got was filled with information about random people, what they have read, and what they are talking about. To be honest, it just didn't interest me. I didn't know who they were and didn't care what they thought. However, a recent newsletter was a huge improvement. It included an interview with author Paulo Coelho of *The Alchemist* and then

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## Swapping and Selling: A Short List of Sites

After using the variety of resources to find the books you like, check out the "book swapping" world to get a copy of what you desire. The main idea with these sites is to enter a wish list of books you'd like to receive, which they will match with those who have them. Then users mail the books to each other. Personally, I'm waiting for a swap site that comes with a personal assistant to mail my books for me, but as soon as I find one, I'll jump in.

### BookMooch

<http://bookmooch.com/>

BookMooch allows you to earn points along the way and use them towards your book exchange. You have to love the site's sense of humor. A toolbar designed to permit users to browse at stores such as Amazon, and then have the book data imported into their BookMooch wish list is called the "Moochbar."

### Facebook's Virtual Bookshelf: Bookcrossing

<http://www.bookcrossing.com>

### GoodReads

<http://www.goodreads.com>

When you enter a book on GoodReads, the system asks if you want to swap or sell it. However, I didn't see a way to come back to this later. Perhaps this function is still under development.

### PaperBackSwap

<http://www.paperbackswap.com>

You can share your books — not just paperbacks it turns out — for nothing more than postage and, to the site's credit, it offers a feature for printable postage as well.

### Bookswim.com

<http://www.bookswim.com>

Describes itself as a "Netflix" for books. Literally a book rental program.

# What's New, LibraryThing?

## An Interview With **Tim Spaulding**, LibraryThing Founder

I caught up with Tim Spaulding recently so he could tell us how things have gone this past year as well as about any new features we can expect:

**We talked back in March 2007. Can you give us a sense in the last year what have been the most popular additions to LibraryThing?**

It's hard to pick, but some highlights are:

- Take-off of LibraryThing for Libraries [LTFL]. We're an official feature in 40 libraries, with a dozen or so testing it. They range from the big — Salt Lake County — to the tiny — Bedford [Texas] — and cover both academic and public libraries in the U.S. and abroad. LTFL is becoming one of the main things LT does now.
- Early reviewers. LibraryThing helps publishers get ARCs to interested readers. The program has exploded. Last month's batch included 23 publishers, 46 books, and 1172 copies [<http://www.librarything.com/blog/2008/03/march-early-reviewers.php>].
- LibraryThing local. Debuted just last week, members have since added over 16,000 bookstores and libraries, and are adding many events too. LibraryThing Local is an ambitious program to link the online book world with the offline.
- Common Knowledge. LibraryThing is becoming the "IMDb" of books. Common Knowledge allows members to catalog what bookstores and libraries do not — characters, places, where authors live, agents, editors and so forth. It also includes series. In two weeks LT members made as much series data as Bowker/Syndetics \*sells.\*

**Last year, the AbeBooks partnership was new. Tell me how that partnership is going and what you've learned from it? Are there other partnerships in the wings you can share with us?**

It's going well. We continue to refine how LibraryThing recommendations appear on the AbeBooks site and AbeBooks continues to help us in the industry. LibraryThing for Libraries is the main way our data is getting out now, but we also have a partnership with AquaBrowser — which takes LibraryThing for Libraries data and integrates it into their platform. We also have two other major partnerships in the works — retail and data — that are close, but not sealed.

**Let's talk a little about social networking again. When we talked last, you pointed out that the connection with the person's tastes was one of LibraryThing's strengths rather than the person. But, you mentioned the blog widgets as a way to increase that social connection. Have you made any changes since March 2007 to accommodate those looking for more of these kinds of personal connections?**

We're about to release a new JSON API, which will help people to do whatever they want with their data, and, I think, spur some new widgets. But the only released change has been an image-based widget suitable for email signatures.

Within LibraryThing, we've increased the focus on the more "directly" social features — adding a "connections" tab on your profile that helps you keep track of what your friends have been adding and reviewing.

LibraryThing Local is a big step toward social interaction, insofar as local events are inherently social, and LT lets you tell people your favorite bookstore and advertise the readings and other events you're thinking of attending. You can also find all the members in your area — anyway, members willing to put their location on their profile.

**How familiar are you with subscription book lists and recommendation services such as EBSCO and Gale products? What are your impressions of the value of these kinds of services and their place in the market?**

I think LibraryThing for Libraries has shown the way when it comes to catalog enhancements. By putting the content directly into the catalog, LibraryThing has done something Syndetics and Novelist and so forth should have done, but didn't. I think you'll see a lot more innovation from us in this connection, and I think you'll see others adopting our technologies.

**There is a growing realm of swapping book services, which amazes me. As a working parent I find it challenging to get lunches packed, kids to activities, and dinner on the table, let alone adding in a trip to the post office to drop off a book for someone. Yet, these services seem popular. Do you have any thoughts on this topic?**

I'm entranced by these sites, although I too couldn't imagine finding the time for it. Also, I don't alienate books — they're like diamonds! LT decided NOT to get into this field, I think wisely. I have a lot of admiration for BookMooch. That guy knows how to do it.

**Thank you for providing such a feature-rich book recommendation engine. This is still my favorite part of LibraryThing. Is there anything new on the horizon in terms of features for search?**

Recommendations are a rising boat. Every time we redo them — and we have to do them in batches because the math is SO hard — it lifts another tier of books into the good-recommendations realm. But no, nothing to announce now.

featured authors and movers and shakers (most popular books on the shelves in people's collections).

## Facebook

Facebook's application, called Visual Bookshelf, is a product of a company called LivingSocial [<http://www.livingsocial.com>]. I'm no Facebook addict, but periodically I get Friend requests, most of which I accept. Sometimes I have been rewarded with reconnecting to a few people from my past. More often than not, though, I get bombarded by my friends with some pretty silly applications, such as playing virtual games with them, getting "good Karma," and other things of that kind. A few days ago, however, I got a request from my friend who happens to be in my book club as well to add to her Visual Bookshelf. I couldn't resist the call to action, particularly as I was working on this column at the time.

Adding the Visual Bookshelf application to your Facebook means permitting Facebook to follow what you read and tell the world and vice versa. After agreeing to these terms, the first thing you see is a list of best-selling books in history — designed as a "Reader Compatibility Test." Ranging from classics to books made into movies such as *The Da Vinci Code*, you vote on them by noting, "Hate it," "Indifferent," "Like it," or "Love it."

These are followed by "Other Leaders" and then more conventionally popular fiction — titles such as "Recent New York Bestsellers," "Adaptations," and "Non-Fiction" choices.

After finishing the test, I got the "Would you be willing to recommend it?" question followed by the list of all my friends in Facebook. Since the Visual Bookshelf had yet to prove itself to me, I declined. The next screen compared my friend's answers to the "Reader Compatibility Test" and mine for each book. This didn't prove very interesting, as, in our case, we chose to vote on almost entirely different choices.

On the home page of the Visual Bookshelf, you search for a book to add to your shelf. I added my top 10 favorites fairly rapidly and appreciated that the majority of what you need to do you can do in almost a single step. No other site that I've used has this slick a user interface. The book comes up, gives me the option to click "I've read it," "Want to read it," "Reading it now," or "Not interested." Then I can add my comment/review right beneath it. Upon submission, the page re-paints and presents books I might like to read, but the option to add a book by title, author, or ISBN remains visible. You can recommend a book you're looking at anytime to your list of friends. Or you can choose to read other people's comments about the book. While

adding a book I'd read, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Facebook recommended a book to me that happened to be our current book club pick — a nonfiction book called *Three Cups of Tea*. The ease of entry and presentation of recommendations alongside reviews of new books made this process addicting.

With only one of my friends connected, I confess, I sent out a few more invitations to people I know who like to read, so I could see what else they read. My only complaints about content are that the reviews by users were on average poor-quality. I still felt compelled to visit Amazon to read literature reviews or higher-quality reviews to decide whether I wanted to read the book.

Visiting my Visual Bookshelf a few weeks later turned out, similar to my experience with GoodReads, a bit of a let down. Book recommendations seemed based on authors I'd read;

**I loved seeing the LibraryThing connection in Facebook. That connection shows both companies know that these two applications combined can be exceptionally powerful.**

the only added value was the star rating offered by others in their reviews that appeared beneath them. But, again, the user interface is exceptionally good. You get what you need when you need it in terms of information; calls to action, e.g., to review a book you've read, are right there, prompted in a nonannoying fashion so you do take the second required to provide the information.

Other features include seeing what your Friends have read and their reviews, and Leaders, which are leading books and reviewers. You can invite others to join you, take the test again or invite others to take the test, import wish lists and, even import your LibraryThing library. I loved seeing the LibraryThing connection in Facebook. That connection shows both companies know that these two applications combined can be exceptionally powerful.

Interestingly, while your main menu is all Visual Bookshelf-related, above the menu you will see smaller links to get recommendations for music, movies, restaurants, gaming, and drinking. Apparently, LivingSocial has its heart set on changing the social recommendation world in all areas of life.

# Gale's Books & Authors

## An Overview From **Marc J. Cormier**

**Books & Authors is feature-rich, providing some cataloging features and a book-browsing capability. How would you best describe this product for your potential customers?**

Books & Authors is more about an experience vs. a database. This new resource was created with patrons in mind, utilizing direct input from librarians, their patrons and students utilizing their public libraries to help drive development.

**Do you see any other company as a competitor? How is your company different?**

There are some e-commerce sites — and a limited number of publisher sites — available today that provide pathfinders to new literature. In most cases, they are complimentary to Books & Authors. We offer a number of unique strengths that are new to the market at large, including a companion Open Web portal that drives potential patrons to local libraries that have the full library version of Books & Authors available for free, once they authenticate with their library credentials.

This new resource also provides a rich graphical environment that invites patrons to unique browsing experience, rich biographical coverage of authors, and Read-Alike lists from a group of highly esteemed genre and subject experts, among other things. The difference with Gale is that we are one of the few true publishers in this area, with some imprints that originate in 19th century. Much of the content in Books & Authors is created through our long-standing editorial processes and will continue to be published year over year, without fail.

**Who are the people visiting the site? What are the demographics? Why do they want to use it? Does this differ at all from who you are targeting? Any interesting stories about how the people who give you feedback have affected your direction with the product?**

Books & Authors is mainly visited by — and designed for — public library patrons, which also includes student users at public libraries. In most cases, customers and patrons have cited an ease of navigation, welcoming interface, unique content and extensibility with Open Web tools, such as social bookmarking sites and upcoming implementation of RSS feeds, as the prime factors in driving them to use B&A. While the database is fairly new, one thing we heard loud and clear before launch and during advisory meetings that focused on interface design is that many patrons today — especially students and your read-

ers — form a visceral connection with the physical book. This is especially true in the case of series titles, where the cover design/artwork is as much a part of the franchise as the author him- or herself.

This drove our conscious decision to provide even more space for book jackets and other visual elements in the interface. Prior to this discussion, our results lists looked similar to our other library products. We also learned that there is a distinct lack of high-quality, authoritative biographical content in the typical reader's advisory service. Based on that knowledge, we chose to include tens of thousands of biographies from well-known sources like *Contemporary Authors*, the *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, and others to fill in that gap. These biographies go well beyond the scope of author alone and discuss publication history, influences on the writer and full awards, further reading and bibliographic details.

**Can you tell us more about the choices you make to leverage outside content such as "expert picks" or awards? How do you determine what to include as a top source?**

We include sources based on a number of criteria, but ultimately, these are vetted and approved by an Advisory Board that helps guide the content development of B&A. Gale has been providing pathfinder tools like B&A, both online and in print, for nearly two decades, and Books & Authors will continue to rely on the same recommendation sources, in addition to new sources secured along the way. As our reach grows, we continue to add Librarian's Favorites and Expert Picks from libraries and publications in the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and wherever else this resource is satisfying patron's needs.

**Do you have any stats on which of your features are more heavily used? Any plans to build some kind of a recommendation engine or partner with one?**

Since Books & Authors is still hot off the press, we're still learning how anticipated usage is comparing to actual patron usage. To date, the most utilized feature is, quite simply, accessing titles from our Browse Genre option on the home page. Patrons like the ability to dive in via subgenre and come out the other side with a list of titles that are sortable and include book jackets to help identify what they're reading now and what might be in their reading future. Our Read-Alike generator is the current recommendation engine of choice and is based on

the indexing provided by our genre and subject experts. This certainly doesn't preclude us from partnering with existing tools, but our focus is primarily on creating those tools in large part and adding popular Open Web features along the way.

**Let's talk about partnerships. Are you planning any that you can share with us?**

There are ongoing discussions with several content sources and Web 2.0 tools that will bring new levels of information and interactivity to the database. While we're not able to speak directly to these points at this time, they are — and will continue to be — a part of the long-term growth of Books & Authors in the coming years and in the not-so-distant future!

**There is no current social component to the application, short of trying to connect users with their local public libraries. Is anything else planned?**

In addition to driving usage of Books & Authors as a library resource, there are a number of features that we currently support that allow creation of user-generated content, as well as the ability to interact with popular social bookmarking sites. Users can write an unlimited number of book reviews, as well as rankings of individual books in the database. In the very near future, these same users will be able to make this content public or private, allowing fellow users to search for these reviews and essentially designate them as "Favorite Reviewers."

**There is a growing realm of swapping book services. Do you have any thoughts on this topic?**

There are a number of programs gaining steam in libraries as well as sites on the Web that support this organic, "risk-free" method of swapping books and exploring new literature. Our goals are as such: 1.) to support our library customers and 2.) to provide new entry ways to literature for their customers: library patrons. As we more fully integrate Books & Authors with popular search engines, library catalogs, and community groups, we will also integrate more fully with the tools they use to support further reading. As such, we are investigating a number of activities — like book swapping — that can be hosted on or supported by Books & Authors. More details to come!

I reviewed the robust functionality of LibraryThing nearly a year ago and still maintain that the functionality offered through its Book Suggester and Library Suggester applications offer the best search recommendation engine out there. See the sidebar What's New, LibraryThing? on page 44 for a Q&A with LibraryThing founder Tim Spaulding,

## Improvements in Your Local Library: Subscription Services

Let's look at one of the subscription services available for book selection. These services are designed to help readers better discover what their libraries have to offer them. And they claim an advantage over the web services in the leveraging of librarians' expertise in creating the product.

### Gale's Books & Authors

<http://booksandauthors.wiseto.com/>

One of the most commonly known products is Gale's Books & Authors. The web-friendly service was adapted from *Gale's What Do I Read Next* print series. Gale wants consumers to know that it is emphasizing the "experience" and offers Venn diagrams to help users find what they need.

The standard features of searching by author, title or series, awards, and other typical criteria exist. Award-winner lists are really nice to have, easy-to-use, and provide far more extensive choices than other online resources typically do, e.g., online book stores or the award websites themselves. Browsing by genre is also convenient and appealing to the nonlibrarian or casual reader, who may not recall author or title and wants to browse in a fashion familiar from online book stores. Within the subcategories of a result set, though, I'd love to be able to sort by date to get more recent titles, something most online book stores do provide. The addition of the ability to filter these selections by Children, Young adult, and Adult makes this book selection site a great one for parents. Gale has also added an "If you like" feature, which it believes may connect consumers to themes and genres they might not have otherwise found, but these lists don't appear to be heavily available yet on the site. Gale is targeting reading groups, book clubs, and public libraries with the service.

You can create an account for free. However, the day I used it, the site was slow and the user interface not yet where it should be. The interface is similar to others that rate books and write reviews. But after entering my first book, it didn't register as a book in my collection. Instead, it put it in a separate section called

The screenshot shows the LibraryThing Local interface. At the top, there are links for 'Your Library', 'Add books', 'Your profile', 'Tools', 'Search', and 'Tools'. Below that is a search bar with 'What's in your bag?' and a 'Find' button. A 'Local' link is highlighted. The main content area has a 'Local' heading and a '92130' search result. It lists 'Venues' such as 'San Diego Public Library - Carmel Valley Branch' and 'San Diego Public Library - Carmel Valley'. There is a 'Find venues' search box with '92130' entered, a '5 miles' dropdown, and a 'Search' button. To the right is a map of the area around 92130, with several location markers. At the bottom, there are links for 'Bookstore', 'Library', 'Fair/Festival', and 'Other'.

The newly debuted program LibraryThing local aims to link the online and offline book worlds.

**Reviews & Ratings.** It took me several more steps to figure out how to add the book to my collection. (Find a link for Tools and add a check mark beside it.) The link is a graphic which I didn't recognize as something that would do this function.

The only social or local element I could find here was to enter my ZIP code and get a list of local public libraries. But, when

I entered 92130, I got Pennsylvania and New Jersey though I live in San Diego, Calif. I thought I would receive not only my library's name, but maybe also access to its electronic card catalog, but I didn't find anything near my home nor a way to add the information. (Contrast that experience with the Local link on LibraryThing that not only has a list of the public libraries nearby, but also a variety of bookstores with the option to add information instantly as well. The links for Fairs/Festivals and an Other category provide information about upcoming events. My upcoming event introduced me to a store I did not know about in the area that specializes in mysteries and science fiction.)

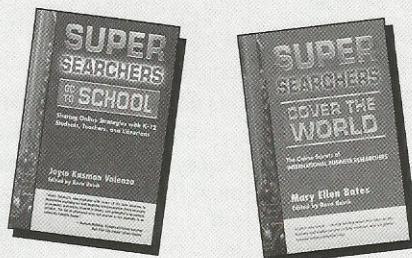
Marc J. Cormier, product manager for literature, The Arts and Humanities, was kind enough to fill us in on its product from Gale. See his interview on pp. 46-47. ■

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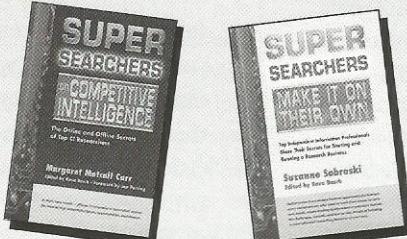
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