

TECHNOLOGY

Online Books and Audiobooks

BY ROYAL VAN HORN

RECENTLY, my relatively negative perception of the availability of online books and audiobooks changed radically. It all started when I read a short blurb on the website <http://manybooks.net>. Manybooks was created by Matthew McClintock, who graciously runs the site as a service to the Internet community. Currently, the site has nearly 18,000 books online. Unlike Project Gutenberg, which specializes only in public domain books that are usually very old, Manybooks also has recent public domain books and books licensed under Creative Commons agreements. (More on Creative Commons below.) For example, *Halo*, a science-fiction thriller by Tom Maddox, is relatively recent and was published in 1991. An example of a recent addition to the site, though not a recent book, is Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

The Manybooks website is one of the best-designed sites and could serve as an exemplar of a clean user interface. One of the most amazing aspects of the site is the availability of books in 21 different formats, including Acrobat (pdf) regular and large type, rich-text format (rtf), iPod notes, and formats that many cell phones can display. In some cases, audio versions of the books are available. The site also features book reviews, lists by popularity, lists of most downloaded, and so on. It's hard to believe that the site runs on a Macintosh Mini running public domain Apache server software. Incidentally, the last time I checked, about 60% of the world's websites run on Apache server software.

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license differs from material in the public domain. With the latter, you can do anything you want, including copying it, altering it, and selling it. An interesting video titled "Want to Work Together?" appears on the CC website. At the home page, click on the "Find CC Licensed Work" button. It was while exploring the Creative Commons home page that I found out about LibriVox.

LibriVox (www.librivox.org) was started in August of 2005 by Hugh McGuire. Its objective is "to make all books in the public domain available, for free, in audio format on the Internet." The following principles guide that work. "LibriVox is a noncommercial, nonprofit, and ad-free project. LibriVox donates its recordings to the public domain. LibriVox is powered by volunteers. LibriVox maintains a loose and open structure. LibriVox welcomes all volunteers from across the globe." As of this writing, the site has had over 1,000 volunteers read books aloud and donate the recordings. Here are a few of the hundreds of titles: *The Three Little Pigs*, by Leslie Brooke; *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe; and, of course, all of Mark Twain's books.

You can browse the LibriVox collection, but using the search function works better. Out of curiosity, I searched for audiobooks about Christmas and found over a dozen. I listened to a portion of *A Christmas Carol*, which was read by various people including a father/daughter team reading one poignant section. If you would like to get ready for the holiday season early, you might think about downloading a few Christmas audiobooks and poems. The site also has a few readings of classic carols and hymns.

Another interesting site for audiobooks is Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic (RFB&D) at www.rfbd.org. RFB&D is a nonprofit organization that has over 30,000 audiobooks available, including recent best sellers and textbooks. For example, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is now available. Individual students with a letter certifying a visual disability can register for a one-time fee of \$65 and an annual renewal fee of \$35. Institutional registration/membership is available at various levels. For example, for \$950 per year, a school can access 100 books, which the site suggests should support use by 26 to 40 students.

RFB&D audiobooks are quite different from those discussed above because they are encoded with information on chapters and page numbers, and they run on specially designed CD players or on a computer that allows a user to pause, skip ahead, bookmark pages, and so on. The site also makes available a wide array of these special CD players and software. I should mention that copyright restrictions limit the wide-scale use

of the RFB&D collection by regular education.

RFB&D recently started a new website for regular education teachers called Learning Through Listening (LTL) at www.learningthroughlistening.org. After registration, which is free, you have access to a database of lesson plans and other activities aimed obviously at improving students' listening skills. Some of the lesson plans are linked to the RFB&D books — which require a subscription — while others include downloadable audio files. For example, a lesson plan for Shel Silverstein's book *A Light in the Attic* has audio clips of "Bear in There," "Nail Biter," and "Sour Face Ann." There is one glitch, though. You need the Pro version of QuickTime to save the audio files. I highly recommend QuickTime Pro, because, for about \$30, it enables you to save a lot of stuff that you find on the Web. If you do order it, though, be sure to read, print, and carefully follow the installation instructions, which are a bit tricky. And do not lose your registration key.

While on the LTL site, I ran across a lesson plan on Jan Brett's book *The Mitten*, and there was a link to a page on her website (www.janbrett.com/mitten_masks_main.htm). To my surprise, I found eight gorgeous illustrations of lovable animals, like an owl and a hedgehog. Be warned: this page was like a giant "time sink" because I took the time to download pdfs of the animals for my wife, a first-grade teacher. Exploring further, I surfed over to Brett's main page and found that she has over 4,000 pages of goodies for elementary teachers and children. In fact, if I were to give out an award for the best children's website I've come across, Jan Brett's site would receive it.

If you are interested in children's book illustrations, one of the best Internet listings is maintained by the Open Directory Project at www.dmoz.org/Arts/Illustration/Children%27s. The Open Directory is a massive human-powered Internet directory. Sometimes humans do better than the automated website crawlers that Google and other sites use.

Many of the websites discussed above are the result of — and, indeed, good examples of — the power of a large group of selfless Internet citizens. The sites demonstrate the power of community, which has become one attribute of what is often referred to as Web 2. Although we are not quite there yet, it is thought that Web 3 will have intelligence. If Web 3 becomes a reality, the network will do the research for a column such as this one — without human intervention.

Dozens of classroom and home uses of the Internet sites I've discussed here are obvious. Above all, though, enjoy them with a child. You and a child can even make a recording for LibriVox!

TECH BRIEFS

- In the January 2007 column, "The Earth on the Web," I discussed Google Earth, which was designed as an open environment that others could modify and extend. Here are a few extensions to Google Earth that *MacWorld* magazine has mentioned. Earth Addresser, available at <http://earthlingsoft.net/Earth%20Addresser>, will take the addresses in your Mac's address book and automatically map them in Google Earth. (Be sure to read the security precaution before you submit your addresses to Google.) Live Global Clouds is a Google Earth add-on that will display various views of the cloud cover over any part of the Earth. The display is about two hours old, so don't use it to stay out of the way of a tornado. You can find the program at www.barnabu.co.uk/live-global-clouds-for-google-earth. A third Google Earth add-on features various historical maps, superimposed on the Google Globe. You can investigate this software at www.davidrumsey.com or at www.google.com/press/pressrel/earth_awareness.html.

- Bluetooth is a short-range wireless communications technology that lets various devices communicate over distances of up to about 30 feet. If your cell phone is less than a couple of years old, there is a good chance it is Bluetooth equipped. Newer computers, printers, and even some autos are equipped with Bluetooth. An excellent source of information and how-to videos can be found at www.bluetooth.com/Bluetooth/Connect/Devices. This link will lead you to the videos that explain how to pair up various devices. **K**

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