

Hyper literate: Local readers and writers reaping the rewards of book-themed social networking sites

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When visiting a friend's home for the first time, do you: a) compliment their super-sized flat screen TV; b) admire their plants; or c) go straight to their bookshelves to see what books you have in common?

For booklovers, the answer is usually C. A quick scan of one's living room library is an ad hoc personality assessment that reveals shared and sometimes secret interests. Acquaintances can become fast friends over a mutually loved (or loathed) novel, and nothing breaks that first-date tension quicker than discovering a shared fanaticism for genre fiction, trashy memoirs or the sociological writings of Michel Foucault.

Through their virtual bookshelves, a trio of social networking sites -- GoodReads, LibraryThing and Shelfari-- are now replicating this experience online, so that in a time when DVD collections are replacing bookshelves in the home, bibliophiles can still connect via the Internet.

Book-themed social networking sites are similar to Facebook and MySpace. Members get a profile page where they can upload photos and personal information and connect with friends, but the centerpiece of a user's profile is their book collection, a cyber bookcase that electronically catalogs their real-world library. Members can connect with others by perusing their bookshelves, searching local events, looking up other local users or by a feature that identifies members with shared reading interests.

But these sites are more than just places to catalog books and friends. Through a variety of interactive features, they are turning reading into a team sport.

"Reading is kind of a solitary activity," says Lena Phoenix, a Boulder resident and member of GoodReads and LibraryThing. "This opens up a whole new dimension to people like me who never had a social dimension to their reading. It's so fun to read a book and then go online and talk with somebody who's read it."

Her preference is GoodReads, where she has compiled more than 500 books and more than 400 friends. She also writes a substantial amount of book reviews for others to read. Phoenix says what she gets in return is recommendations from other users with similar interests, and she has access to countless book reviews herself, many of which the site e-mails to her when one of her friends is active on the site.

"When I get an e-mail with a bunch of book reviews in it, I can scan through and read the ones I think are interesting," Phoenix says. "I'm reading twice as much now as I was before I was on the site."

Phoenix is not alone. GoodReads, LibraryThing and Shelfari have more than 3 million members combined, though there is some overlap among users not accounted for in that number. Other sites like Overbooked.com and WhatShouldIReadNext.com also cater to the cyber bookworm, and LivingSocial.com features ReadingSocial, a feature that allows users to catalog their books and links users' accounts directly with their Facebook and MySpace pages.

Barnes and Noble has even gotten in on the act. On Oct. 27, the chain bookseller launched My B&N, where customers can create a profile and compile "wish lists" and a virtual library.

Book-themed social networking has also gotten a boost from Amazon.com. In August, Amazon acquired Shelfari, with plans to incorporate the latter's features into its Web service.

"Both companies are dedicated to building great communities that celebrate books," says Tammy Hovey, PR manager of Shelfari. "Through this acquisition, Shelfari will be in an even better position to create a dynamite community and provide innovative new tools around the books people love."

Members of the Boulder community have been signing up to take advantage of these features, from publishers and

authors looking to expand their fan base to booklovers just looking for the next good read.

Chapter One

The phenomenon of book-themed social networking has rather modest roots.

"It started as basically a personal project of mine," says Tim Spalding, founder of LibraryThing, the first of the major book-themed social networking sites. "I thought I'd get some friends of mine, some ex-academics, to catalog their libraries."

He launched LibraryThing in August 2005 to post his own library and view those of his friends. But then he noticed something unexpected: Conversations were growing around the book catalogs. He wasn't too surprised. Though reading is predominantly a solitary activity, the thrill doesn't end when the book is finished.

"In a lot of ways the soul of a book is talking about the book with others," Spalding says.

LibraryThing has since grown in size and scope. Spalding now has nine employees working for his company, which is based in Portland, Maine. And though it has a social component, LibraryThing is also dedicated to preserving literary culture. The site accesses more than 690 libraries around the world, and is constantly cataloging many more locations, including church libraries. In November, he and some friends spent the weekend cataloging the library of a church in Massachusetts.

"LibraryThing has mostly personal members, but there are a lot of churches, synagogues, Masonic halls -- these collections that didn't used to matter," Spalding says. "The ultimate goal is that you can say, 'Here's this interesting book. Are there any churches in town that I might be able to get this from?'"

One of the site's most popular features is "I See Dead People's Books," a public group project that enters legacy libraries -- the personal book collections of famous dead folks. It started with Thomas Jefferson (perhaps LibraryThing's most famous member), whose collection of more than 5,000 books had been donated to the Library of Congress. Once his list was uploaded, others were added so members can compare their own libraries with those of Sylvia Plath, Mozart and Tupac Shakur.

GoodReads, which launched in December 2006, and is based in California, features a younger membership, Spalding says, but one not as dedicated as members of LibraryThing (who call themselves Thingamabrarians).

Oddly enough, like one of its competitors, Shelfari, LibraryThing is also affiliated with Amazon. In 2006, online Canadian bookseller AbeBooks purchased a minority share of LibraryThing. In August of this year, just weeks before purchasing Shelfari, Amazon bought AbeBooks. Therefore, Amazon owns 40 percent of LibraryThing and 100 percent of Shelfari.

(Membership is free at GoodReads and Shelfari. LibraryThing is free for members posting up to 200 books in their library. To post more than 200 books, users can pay a membership fee of \$10 per year or purchase a lifetime membership for \$25.)

Shelfari launched in October 2006 and is based in Seattle.

"The idea was to introduce readers to a global community of booklovers and encourage them to share their literary inclinations and passions with peers and friends," Hovey says. "It's exciting to see the passion our members have in being a part of the community."

Under review

That passion for reading is alive and well, and reports of the book's demise have been greatly exaggerated, say the founders of these book-themed social networking sites.

"Books like the 'Harry Potter' series and Stephenie Meyer's ('Twilight') series have helped to minimize the age gap

between readers with their universal appeal, and have also helped to expose new readers to the imaginative world of literature," Hovey says. "There's nothing like that feeling of getting completely consumed by the book you're reading and wanting to share your experience with others. That's part of the reason why we created Shelfari."

The readers are still out there. Books just aren't getting the same media attention that they used to, says Otis Chandler, founder of GoodReads.

"There is an impression that reading is somehow declining," he says. "But people are still reading and loving books, and I don't think that will ever change. Reading is such a solitary activity you just don't hear about it all that often -- it gets lost in the mass-media noise. And that's something we're trying to change with GoodReads.

"If you browse the site you can learn exactly which books your friends just read, and even what they're reading right now," he adds. "And then the next time you see them you can talk about books instead of who got kicked off on 'American Idol' last night."

Spalding, of LibraryThing, agrees.

"There is a solid core of hundreds of thousands or millions of people in the United States for whom books are the most important thing," he says.

He says part of the reason books aren't getting the same press they once did is the decline of book reviews in newspapers -- itself a product of the struggles in the print industry that have decreased newspaper size and led to the cutting of content. In July, the Los Angeles Times ceased publishing its freestanding book review section, and over the summer Publishers Weekly, one of the premiere sources of book reviews, cut the amount of money it pays to reviewers.

"You're seeing the slow-motion death of the newspaper book review," Spalding says.

He admits that a contributing factor is the availability of free book reviews online, especially the proliferation of peer reviews at places like Amazon and, ironically, his own site, which he calls "regrettable."

However, the expansive space on the Web and the high number and diverse tastes of peer reviewers have provided unprecedented exposure and critical notice for books that otherwise would have ended up unopened in the news room's recycle bin.

"There are thousands of people on every day putting in their two cents and recommending books to their friends," Chandler says. "Those recommendations can inspire you to read more, learn more and even grow as a person, and I think that's pretty amazing."

Author, author

The authors have taken notice and are now using these sites to their advantage. Phoenix, in addition to being a member of GoodReads and LibraryThing, is also an author. In 2007 she released her debut novel, "The Heart of a Cult," a fictional account of a woman's accidental entry into a cult.

"It looks at the psychological dynamics of spiritual communities," she says. "It's kind of a warning about how people can get themselves into trouble if they give credit to people who haven't earned it."

The book is based loosely on some of her own experiences, and she has finished a second book, a memoir on the same theme.

"It's kind of comic reflections on the New Age spiritual path," Phoenix says.

She initially joined GoodReads to promote her book, before becoming hooked as a member. She can't quantify how her involvement has translated into sales, but "it's certainly generated interest that wasn't there before," Phoenix says.

Her book likely wouldn't have garnered much attention in newspapers, which are tight on review space and inundated with books vying for review.

"It's harder and harder for people to hear about books when they're not being talked about as much in the mainstream media. Sites like GoodReads are going to be picking up that slack," Phoenix says.

It's not just lesser-known authors that are getting involved. Big-name writers like Neil Gaiman, Michael Connelly, Richard Dawkins and Paulo Coelho, author of "The Alchemist," are active on GoodReads, where they can post videos and books and interact with fans.

"We saw that there was a great opportunity for GoodReads to become a great way for authors to connect with readers," Chandler says. "Much as bands can connect with fans on MySpace, GoodReads authors can create a profile and add friends, post comments, respond to messages, add a bio, add a picture, add videos, add excerpts of their writing, and even post giveaways of upcoming books."

Spalding agrees.

"It's definitely the future of the mid-list author that they do a lot of their own marketing," he says. "The authors who recognize the power of social networking sites will do better."

Publishers as well.

In 2007, Boulder resident Nate Jordon started Monkey Puzzle Press, which publishes Monkey Puzzle Magazine. The press is set to publish two poetry books in the next six months, including one by Golden-based poet Travis Cebula. The fifth installment of Jordon's literary journal hit the shelves last month.

He's primarily been marketing his product through GoodReads, where Monkey Puzzle hosts a discussion group.

"Being a new publisher with a new literary magazine, it's invaluable to be involved in this kind of thing. I think GoodReads is one of a number of sites that facilitates the networking, the community," Jordon says. "They're a great way for readers, writers and publishing companies to basically share ideas."

Last year, Jordon launched his literary journal by distributing copies on area campuses. He says the exposure he's received on GoodReads has allowed him to take his publishing company to the next level.

"Without that, I'd have much more of a struggle in getting established," Jordon says. "It facilitates what I would call the underground literary movement. There are a lot of small publications out there. How do we get those new works of literature out there into the public eye?"

For Jordon, it's not just new works, but diverse works. He was introduced to Henry Miller via a GoodReads recommendation.

"Every reader, or every writer, gets somewhat stuck in what we call our comfort zone. This is what we like to read, and these are the authors we like," he says.

The recommendations on sites like GoodReads help expand a reader's interests.

"You get hip to some good books and authors that you otherwise wouldn't be hip to. It offers more than any college classroom ever could," Jordon says. "You never know what kind of recommendation is going to come your way that you're going to fall in love with. This is exactly what this type of site is all about."

That's what keeps readers like John McIntosh, of Boulder, checking his Shelfari account every few weeks.

"The whole thing I care about all of these sites for is to find new books to read, new authors I've never heard of," he says. "The dream is to find an author you really love that's written 20 books."

At 68, McIntosh is older than the average user of social networking sites. He joined Shelfari two years ago and admits that he doesn't get involved in the site's social-oriented features, like discussions. He's an avid reader, and uses Shelfari to get recommendations for books and authors he hasn't read. (He also frequents WhatShouldIReadNext.com.) He likes to check out random selections, available on the site's "What's Hot" page.

"I like that, just to say, 'Huh, that's interesting,' or, 'That's not interesting,'" McIntosh says. "Kind of like looking at the new book shelf at the library."

Library 2.0

McIntosh is also a frequenter of the Boulder Public Library, and while at first glance it may appear as though these Web sites are rivals with the library, Terzah Becker, a reference specialist at the BPL, says they are a complement, not competition. In fact, the BPL uses LibraryThing in its Web 2.0 training, and members of the book advisory and reference staff have GoodReads accounts to assist them in their jobs, especially when patrons are looking for new books or authors.

"GoodReads is a great tool to help you help that person," Becker says.

The BPL is very proactive in utilizing Web technology. It offers downloadable audio books and access to articles at its site, and patrons can reserve books online, connect with a librarian seven days a week and even keep track of their reading history if they choose.

"You don't even have to come in to the library to be a library patron anymore," Becker says.

The library is currently updating its Web site to include interactive features such as reader reviews and ratings, "allowing our patrons places to comment and rate books and share with each other," Becker says. "We have plans through our Web site to expand the patrons' ability to do that."

She can't discuss all of the features yet, as they're still in development, but expects them to be available in February of next year. The new features will emphasize the community aspect that is popular on GoodReads.

"It's all about community building," Becker says, and "involving readers more in the process about getting out good books."

Being Web savvy is key to catering to a new generation of patrons that grew up with the Internet, she says.

"GoodReads and LibraryThing are great for the people who grew up with Facebook and MySpace," Becker says. "The ones who do like to read can find kindred spirits and in a milieu they're comfortable with. A book group can be awkward to someone who's used to interacting online. It takes the awkwardness out of it."

Bibliophilia

An online book site may never fully replicate the experience of being sucked into the pages of a good novel. And maybe an online discussion can't replace the interpersonal connection that takes place when sitting around a table with friends discussing a good read.

But in a time when the printed page is having trouble keeping up in a digitalized world, these Web-based book sites are taking the love of reading into cyberspace.

"Our long-term plans involve continuing to make a great and engaging product for people who read books. A place where readers, authors, book clubs and even publishers can all visit to get value," Chandler says.

And while his site and others are bringing books into the future with advanced technology, places like GoodReads are also allowing the user to dig into the past, as cataloging one's library can bring long-forgotten tomes to the fore.

"It's addictive in a funny way, because if you think back to the books you read in high school, middle school or even

as a child, it's like a trip down memory lane," Chandler says. "The books we read often help shape the people we become, and remembering who we were when we read a book can be a lot of fun."

For local members of these sites, it's all about the love of the book.

"I started reading early and have been reading forever," McIntosh says. "Books are just wonderful. You get ideas from them. In effect you feel like you're meeting people that way. You're having experiences."

For Phoenix, it's a life-enriching experience, online or off.

"Books just expand the world and open up so many new dimensions of the world," she says. "I think these social-networking sites open up a whole new dimension to books and reading. It's a little addictive I have to say.

"People who read are very passionate about reading," Phoenix adds. "When you spend time on a site like GoodReads, you find out that there's a lot of life left in the book."