Finding printed material online (not including eBay).

One of the difficulties in writing about specific aspects of the Internet is that it is a moving target. In preparing for this article, I reviewed a handout I had drawn up a few years ago on how eBay works and the features that are useful. About half of it would have to be rewritten to make it useful today. Websites come and go (remember Bibliofind.com or WorldBookDealers.com?) and features are added or removed. So keep in mind that I'm writing for the moment.

My past two articles for the APHA Newsletter dealt with finding printing equipment online, but now let's look at printed materials. Most people can't collect printing presses, linotype machines, cabinets of type, paper cutters, etc. (especially those who live in apartments), so they have to be satisfied with collecting the end products. The Internet has altered how we find second-hand or antiquarian books and how dealers sell them. It is now easier, faster, and more impersonal to find the books you need.

In the old days (before Bill Clinton), when you were looking for a group of books, you would start by contacting the dealers who specialized in the subject and seeing what was in stock. What was left was a list of wants that would be sent to various dealers, and then you waited. And waited. And waited. Sometimes it would take years for you to finish off the list. Now you can search the stock of thousands of dealers online and acquire almost the entire list in a couple of months.

There are three types of sites you can peruse for used books. Many dealers have their own website with a searchable database of their stock. This is fine for your favorite dealers (and you do have your favorites, don't you?), but inefficient if you are searching for a list of books.

The second type is a database of multiple dealers. Here you have the benefit of being able to search the stock of many dealers with one search. The largest one is <www.abebooks.com> with more than 12,000 dealers contributing. The Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America (ABAA) and the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) both have databases of their members. There are a myriad of other sites around the world too numerous to list here, but Rare Book Review (London) has a directory of sites in each issue, plus reviews of them.

For high-octane searching, there are the metada-
Finding Books Online from page 1

tabases. These are websites that take your search, run it against multiple databases and display the results; one-stop searching. This is a very efficient way of working through a list. The two major sites that do this are <www.bookfinder.com> and <www.addall.com/used>.

So far everything sounds simple, but there are insidious things lurking below the surface waiting to trip you up, and you won’t even know it is happening. Being a well-educated person who has ABC for Book Collectors memorized and knows the specialized vocabulary used for describing printed materials is a hindrance to finding books online. While in the old days it took a major commitment to become a successful antiquarian book dealer, we now have virtual book dealers who deal exclusively online. There are many people who have only a small stock and do not know the proper vocabulary in describing a book. So, if you use specific search terms, you might eliminate relevant results because some of the dealers didn’t use them (or use them correctly).

Your first instinct in finding a book may be to use one of the metadatabases, but be careful. In order for these sites to search across multiple databases, they can only search elements common to all the databases. Some databases have extra features that might be important to more successful searching. Also, some sites have such specialized features that they can’t be included in the metadatabases. For example, there is an excellent site for antiquarian books in Scandinavia, <www.antikvariat.net>, which currently has 86 dealers and about 820,000 titles – a pittance compared to Bookfinder.com. As an experiment, I once took a list of Scandinavian bibliographies and reference books and searched the list on the two sites. I found for sale 66% of the titles on the Scandinavian site, but only 44% on the much larger Bookfinder.com. Antikvariat.net takes into account the unique traits of the Scandinavian languages and its search features are so specialized that it isn’t searched by the metadatabases.

Another thing you have to be careful with the metadatabases is that individual websites might not be available for various reasons, such as maintenance. If you do a search and a site is down, the results page shows “0” results instead of telling you that the system is not working properly. The results might not be accurate, but you won’t know.

Some of you might be instructors teaching courses related to history of printing and the book, and you would like specific examples to show your students. Here is where the online sites can be fun. Think of the type of materials you would like to have, come up with terms to toss into a keyword search and then try variations and see what turns up. If you want a book in sheets, try various combinations of uncut, unbound, unfolded, etc., and look over the results.

I’ll end this article with a little bit of trivia. I went though issues of The Book Collector to find the first dealer’s advertisement with an e-mail address and URL. The first advertisement with a web address was in 1995 and the first one with an e-mail address was in 1993. It doesn’t seem that long ago, but considering the life of the periodical, e-mail addresses have appeared in barely 20% of its existence. Now the tricky trivia: what year did the first fax number appear in an advertisement of that periodical? (Answer on page 4)

Vincent Golden

The next installment: Books and eBay
Beach Reading

So what are you reading on your summer vacation? Your editor finds quiet vacation mornings on a porch the best time to read books that are heavy—either literally or metaphorically. Standing on the NYC subway, where most of her reading is done, mitigates against hardcover anything. And returning home in the evenings, she finds mysteries and Pleasant Novels provide the best antidote to a stressful workday.

Working through the three volumes of the Technische Hochschule Darmstadt 1995 edition of Fournier’s Manuel Typographique (one volume of facsimile, one of Harry Carter’s English translation, and one with James Mosley’s notes) required both arms of the Adirondack chair and the ottoman; even though the volumes are each rather small, they want to be read simultaneously. It would take an octopus to read it on public transportation!

This year, your editor will actually read (rather than just look at the pictures of) Alastair Johnston’s Alphabets to Order: Literature of 19th Century Typefounders’ Specimens. As we will be traveling by car, the trunk might also hold Legros and Grant’s Typographical Printing Surfaces, on the reading list for James Mosley’s Rare Book School course. Unfortunately, its 730 pages have proven just too heavy to carry around town (although it might come in handy as a defensive weapon). So what might you pack into your suitcase this year? There’s a new edition of Lewis Blackwell’s 20th Century Type (New Haven: Yale University Press, c2004). Even better, Richard-Gabriel Rummonds’s Nineteenth-Century Printing Practices and The Iron Handpress was due out from Oak Knoll in June 2004. If it hasn’t made it to your bookstore yet, you might dip into his 1998 epic Printing On The Iron Handpress.

Another book just out is Fred Smeijers’ Type Now: A Manifesto (Hyphen, 2004). We haven’t seen this yet, but if it is as interesting and provocative as his Counterpunch: Making Type in the 16th Century, Designing Type Now (Hyphen, 1997), it is well worth a read.

It has been suggested that sand-kicking fellow beachgoers might object to bespectacled members reading large, scholarly tomes. Crossover volumes to consider include APHA’s own publication D.B.U. and R.R.: Selected Extracts From Correspondence That Passed Between Daniel Berkeley Updike & Rudolph Ruzicka, which is readable and interesting. Simon Loxley’s anecdotal Type: The Secret History of Letters (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004) is recommended by board member Martin Hutner. For something enjoyable, provocative bits of which could be read aloud to your friends (well, selected friends), try Eric Gill’s Essay On Typography, High Wycombe, 1930 (there are new editions, including a lovely small-format facsimile Godine paperback from 1993, still available).

And if you really have to read a novel, there is The Rule of Four (Dial Press, 2004), a work of suspense by Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason which centers on the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (but dwells on the text rather than on the book itself). It is gripping enough to make one antisocial (“just let me finish the chapter”), so perhaps it should be read only if you go on vacation by yourself. Bon voyage!

Jane Siegel
An Heartfelt Apology from Your Faithful Editor

Dear reader, this issue is late in the spectacular manner normally reserved for Italian periodicals. The “Beach Reading” article really ought to be rewritten as “Back to School Fashions for the Bibliophile.” The fault is mine, and I am truly very sorry. I’m sure you could do better—please volunteer.

We do believe that the Fall issue, containing the Membership Directory, will come out in a timely fashion.

Jane Siegel

Desperately Seeking a Designer

Our production editor, who has done such a lovely job these past few years fashioning a Newsletter which befits an organization dedicated to printing, must retire. We seek someone who can take e-mailed copy, massage it in a standard page set-up program, and forward it to the printer on a quarterly basis. The only compensation is the glory of knowing that people who care appreciate your work.

In addition, literate folk who know their grammar and attend, or have friends who attend, the APHA conference and annual meeting, are encouraged to join, or take over, the editorial team.

Contact Jerry Kelly, Vice-President for Publications, <publications@printinghistory.org> to offer your services.

New Members

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