

# SEARCHER

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# WEBMASTERY

by Jennie Starr  
Consultant

## LibraryThing.com: The Holy Grail of Book Recommendation Engines

I started a book club when I was pregnant with my first child, worrying I wouldn't make time to read. Years later, the book club is still going strong, but we struggle, as many clubs do, to find great new selections. I create a list of possible choices and we select them together, but, all too often, we make terrible choices.

In the past, I relied too heavily on Amazon and Barnes & Noble recommendations, which typically recommended current best-sellers. I tried looking through best-seller lists, relying on friend recommendations (a trusted source), and book club lists. One friend swears by Salon.com, the *NY Times Book Review* online; and a magazine called *Booksense*, which compiles reviews from several publications as well as its own. She's also a fan of NPR, especially *Fresh Air*. I tried some of these, but I got desperate for a better way.

With a meeting looming in a few days to pick our next several books, I set out to review book recommendation engines to see if anything out there could help. My research discovered one real gem worth sharing and I highlight it below. When I happened upon LibraryThing.com, I knew I had found the Holy Grail of book recommendation engines.

With most book recommendation engines, you enter an author or book title you like to retrieve recommendations. I used *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* as my test book on Li-

braryThing. I knew I wanted only selections highly recommended in Amazon reviews (4–5 stars), less than 350 pages, and available in paperback. Within an hour, following various recommendations made by LibraryThing, I had a list of 18 books I thought my book club would enjoy.

Most book recommendation engines use collaborative filtering to deliver their results (e.g., Amazon and Barnes & Noble). That means a set of books is recommended off one element of the criteria you entered; enter an author and you'll get a recommendation list the engine has deemed to be similar to that author or a set of choices from people who have purchased that author's books. With the advent of social networking, people are entering the book titles of their collections at home, taking time to tag them in special ways and to review them for others to enjoy.

A few really smart people have begun leveraging this metadata for a variety of purposes. Some sites focus on connecting people who like similar books. Others focus on leveraging the data to make recommendations based on the theory that if you read similar types of material, you might like other books in each other's collections.

### How LibraryThing Differs

LibraryThing is special because it offers three very strong features

for book lovers: a robust cataloging tool, a social element frequently described as "MySpace for books" or "Facebook for books" (but better), and book recommendations based on the collective intelligence of member and institution collections. I'm not aware of any other site that does this much this well. LibraryThing is apparently still in beta, but with all the rich functionality that works this well, one wonders how that can last.

You may add up to 200 books for free, and an unlimited number of books for a year if you pay for a membership. The annual membership runs \$6–\$20, while a lifetime membership runs \$19–\$55. (You decide what you're willing to pay.)

### Creating an Online Catalog of Your Books

I confess I just couldn't understand how or why so many people took the time to add hundreds of book titles to create an online catalog of their collection. But, LibraryThing's founder, Tim Spaulding, sold me on the notion that, just because I wouldn't list my own book collection, didn't mean I couldn't see what other people collected that I might like. I found this ability really appealing. Thankfully, LibraryThing makes the process painless and lightning quick at <http://www.librarything.com/addbooks.php>. And people are adding their books rapidly. The site

analyzes more than 11 million books carrying more than 13 million tags as of the date of this column.

### Entering Your Books

Enter title, author, ISBN, LC Card Number, etc., to search for any book. After you enter a title, the same page paints again with choices from Amazon (the default) on the right. Select

and add reviews or more detailed information.

You can also import your list from elsewhere. LibraryThing provides the means to upload files in TXT, CSV, XML, HTML, RTE, tab-delimited, etc., formats. The files can be 2 MB maximum. Grab a Web page from anywhere, such as Amazon "Wish Lists," "Listmania," "Reader2," or others, and go to town.

When you view a book from Your Library, you can see the various places to purchase it, editions ranked by popularity, and user-provided cover images.

your book if it's there to confirm the title. You can add tags on the same screen to describe your book. But, here's where LibraryThing pulls away from the pack of similar sites out there. Almost all of them stop at this point, with Amazon as the basis for their book information. On LibraryThing, you can choose instead to search the Library of Congress, which turns out to be the best way to find an older book. Amazon may not find it, but you'll still get an entry from the Library of Congress. LibraryThing also provides a way to search 78 other sources from around the world such as university library catalogs. LibraryThing provides so many options that it seems highly unlikely you'll ever have to enter a book's details manually.

I loved doing this; it was quick and easy. Each time you add a book, you can see how many other members have the book in their collection. For example, 29 others owned *A Portrait of Jennie*, while 2,339 members owned *The Red Tent*. You can edit your book records anytime

Of course, if you have to, you can also manually enter the data on any book you own. LibraryThing provides a way for you to enter title; author; other authors; date; ISBN; LC Call No.; Dewey No.; Publication; Tags; Comments; a review; a URL, or a primary, secondary, or original language. You can even give the book a rating of 1–5 (and 1/2) stars.

### Viewing Your Collection

The Your Library display is beautiful with endless optional views. View just the covers of your books, using something LibraryThing calls a Virtual Shelf. Or, view a list and change the view as you like to include covers, Call Numbers, Subject, and ISBN. Basically, slice and dice the view however you like. It's easy to rate your books quickly by just clicking on stars 1–5 from any of the lists you view. Add a review by editing the record of any book.

You can also edit Your Profile to make your catalog private or public, include a picture or not (LibraryThing

cleverly provides pictures of well-known authors or permits you to upload your own), let others comment about your books, or restrict members from doing so. You can enter an email address for lost passwords or opt not to and choose to have comments emailed to you or receive a State of the Thing email from them. You can also add information about yourself, your collection, your Web site address, your name, location, and other services you use, such as MySpace, blogging services, etc. You can even enter the handle you use for each. You can set a primary language for your account, give permissions for libraries or commercial entities to use your reviews, or even approve use by other partner book shops.

### Social Information

When you view a book from Your Library, you can see the various places to purchase it, editions ranked by popularity, and user-provided cover images. Tags used to describe the book by members artfully decorate the page at the top. Next you'll see a list of recommendations based on the book title. A few member reviews follow, along with a link to more reviews if there are any. Member ratings, in a range from 1–5 stars, give you a sense of the overall popularity of the book. The listing includes members who have the book with their profiles in case you want to meet or connect with them. Citations from Wikipedia appear at the bottom of the page.

If you want to communicate with people who enjoyed the book or have something to say about it, you can join online discussions about the book by reviewing the available topics and how many members have provided messages there. You can even swap a book through various third-party swap sites linked from the page.

I didn't really think I'd use these features much. Yet, I admit, I got curious when I was changing my

*(Text continued on page 29)*

**LibraryThing** BETA Catalog your books

Your library | Add books | Your profile | Tags | Suggestions | Search | Tools Zeitgeist | Groups | Talk | About

### The memory keeper's daughter

by Kim Edwards

tags | recommendations | reviews (52) | member ratings | members (1,290) | citations (0)

Tags used to describe the book

2005 2006 2006/08 american Beautiful Fiction **book club** contemporary contemporary fiction Debbie pick don't own down syndrome children fiction **down's syndrome** downs syndrome family fathers and sons Favorite author **fiction** **kentucky** Lexington library wishlist lies lose mother never revealing his secret to NOVEL paperback read read in 2006 Reading Guide Secrets Signed **Unread** USA Today

wishlist (show numbers)

From LibraryThing's recommendations machine (see all recommendations)

1. The Glass Castle : a Memoir by Jeannette Walls
2. Snow Flower and the Secret Fan : a novel by Lisa See
3. My Sister's Keeper : a novel by Jodi Picoult
4. Water for Elephants : a novel by Sara Gruen
5. Once Upon a Day by Lisa Tucker
6. The Mermaid Chair by Sue Monk Kidd
7. The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd
8. The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini
9. Cane River by Lalita Tademy
10. The Owl & Moon Cafe: A Novel by Jo-Ann Mapson

Also check out the LibraryThing Unsuggester, for really bad recommendations based on this book.

Member reviews

From Publishers Weekly  
Edwards's assured but schematic debut novel (after her collection, The Secrets of a Fire King) hinges on the bit a girl with Down syndrome, resulting in the father's disavowal of his newborn daughter. A snowstorm immobilizes young Norah Henry goes into labor, her husband, orthopedic surgeon Dr. David Henry, must deliver their baby; his daughter's handicap, he instructs the nurse, Caroline Gill, to take her to a home and later tells Norah, who son Paul's twin died at birth. Instead of institutionalizing Phoebe, Caroline absconds with her to Pittsburgh. Da moment of the main characters' lives, and Phoebe's absence corrodes her birth family's core over the course of lie warps his marriage; he grapples with guilt; Norah mourns her lost child; and Paul not only deals with his pa yearnings for his sister as well. Though the impact of Phoebe's loss makes sense, Edwards's redundant handli neatly structured story is a little too moist with compassion.

FIND AT...

- Alibris | Alibris | Amazon.com | Barnes & Noble | BookFinder.com | BookSense | Worldcat (others/edit)

EDITIONS, BY POPULARITY

ISBN 0143097145  
Penguin (Non-Classics) (2006), Paperback, 492 pages

ISBN 0739456210  
Penguin (2005), Hardcover

ISBN 0060829804  
Penguin Books (2005), Paperback

ISBN 1426128058  
Recorded Books (2006), Audio CD

ISBN 159413197X  
Penguin (Non-Classics) (2006), Paperback, 492 pages

ISBN 0143038103  
Penguin (Non-Classics) (2006), Paperback, 492

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I own or have read...

**BookSuggester**  
powered by LibraryThing

Suggestions for Snow flower and the secret fan : a novel by Lisa See

752 members (1,115 more popular), 31 reviews, average rating 4.11 stars; (UnSuggester (bad) suggestions)

**People with this book also have...** (x1)

1. The memory keeper's daughter by Kim Edwards (2005) (2005) (suggestion)
2. Dragon bones : a novel by Lisa See (1475) (suggestion)
3. The madman of Langford by Debra Dean (2013) (suggestion)
4. The glass castle : a memoir by Jeannette Walls (503174) (suggestion)
5. March by Gertrude Brooks (65479) (suggestion)
6. Water for elephants : a novel by Sara Gruen (39716) (suggestion)
7. Babes and the little Chinese seamstress by Dai Sijie (8174) (suggestion)
8. One thousand white women : the journals of May Dodd by Jim Fergus (2006) (suggestion)
9. The birth of Venus : a novel by Sarah Dunant (82796) (suggestion)
10. Hobbit by Alan Smitton (5171) (suggestion)
11. The last days of Dogtown : a novel by Anita Diamant (2010) (suggestion)
12. The thirteenth tale : a novel by Clare Setterfield (271036) (suggestion)
13. My sister's keeper : a novel by Jodi Picoult (312622) (suggestion)
14. Saving fish from drowning by Amy Tan (1761) (suggestion)
15. The Serpent in the Garden : A Novel by Janet Gleason (671) (suggestion)

**Books with similar tags**

1. The good woman of China : hidden voices by Xinran (suggestion)
2. The binding shawl, or, A visit from the Foot Emancipation Society : a novel by Katherine Harbison (2004) (suggestion)
3. Walking by the Sea (suggestion)
4. Bound by Diana Ji Napoli (suggestion)
5. Empress Orchid by Andrew Hill (suggestion)
6. Imperial memory : novel by Pearl S. Buck (suggestion)
7. The Boy Lark Club by Amy Tan (suggestion)
8. Falling leaves : the true story of an unloved Chinese daughter by Adeline Yen Mah (suggestion)
9. The bossman's daughter by Amy Tan (suggestion)
10. China boy : a novel by Gus Lee (suggestion)
11. Babes and the little Chinese seamstress by Dai Sijie (suggestion)
12. China men by Maxine Hong Kingston (suggestion)
13. The dark land, one that breaks : a novel by Lenora Hamilton (suggestion)
14. Wild seeds : three daughters of China by Jung Chang (suggestion)
15. Gynocology : the metaphysics of radical feminism by Mary Daly (suggestion)

**Amazon recommendations:**

1. The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeannette Walls (Amazon.com) (suggestion)
2. Water for Elephants: A Novel by Sara Gruen (Amazon.com) (suggestion)
3. Baby Poppo by James Hanan (Amazon.com) (suggestion)
4. March by Gertrude Brooks (Amazon.com) (suggestion)

**People with this book also have...** (x1)

1. The center of everything by Lulu Hurwitz (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
2. Broken for you by Sherrilyn Ball (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
3. We, Kinzie by Jennifer Hough (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
4. Lost in the Forest by Sue Miller (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
5. Thirteen moons : a novel by Charles Frazier (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
6. In the company of the moon : a novel by Lisa See (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
7. The north of me and the : a novel by Sarah Jordan (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
8. Sarah : a novel by Marie Perle (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
9. Revenge of the middle-aged woman by Elizabeth Strout (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
10. When the emperor was Duke : a novel by Katherine Harbison (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
11. The secret keeper by Jodi Picoult (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
12. A thread of grass : a novel by Mary Hanan (2004) (2004) (suggestion)
13. Empress Orchid by Andrew Hill (2004) (2004) (suggestion)

**Books with similar library subjects and classifications...**

1. The last link, Sea that break : a novel by Lenora Hamilton (2004) (suggestion)
2. The binding shawl, or, A visit from the Foot Emancipation Society : a novel by Katherine Harbison (2004) (suggestion)
3. The widow's apprentice by Karen Cashman (2004) (suggestion)
4. Bound by Diana Ji Napoli (2004) (suggestion)
5. The hunting of the last dragon by Sherrilyn Jordan (2004) (suggestion)

A view of a standard book page on LibraryThing

A view of the different recommendation groupings for a book on LibraryThing

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Title	Author	Date	Tags	Rating	Shared
Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women	Gertrude Brooks	1995	muslim, women	★★★★★	242/4
KITE RUNNER	KHALED HOSEINI	2003	afghanistan, muslim, brotherhood	★★★★★	911/125
Babes and the Little Chinese Seamstress	Dai Sijie	2003	chinese, love of reading, communism	★★★★★	841/23
A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail (Official Guides to Bill Bryson the Appalachian Trail)	Bill Bryson	1999	hiking, united states, travel	★★★★★	2288/41
A Trip To The Stars: A Novel	Nicholas Christoper	2001		★★★★★	97/3
My Sister's Keeper: A Novel	Jodi Picoult	2005	morals, sisters, medicine	★★★★★	1810/79
The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel (Penguin Classics)	Berbara Kingsolver	2005	congo, family, difficult choices	★★★★★	3429/12
Snow Flower and the Secret Fan: A Novel	Lisa See	2006	chinese, foot binding, women's secret language	★★★★★	752/31

A more standard library catalog view of your library on LibraryThing, including Call No. and Publication Information

**LibraryThing** BETA Catalog your books

Your library | Add books | Your profile | Tags | Suggestions | Search | Tools Zeitgeist | Groups | Talk | About

Title	Author	Publication	LC Call No.	Entry date
Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women	Gertrude Brooks	Anchor (1995), Paperback, 272 pages	HQ1170 .B74*	Mar 18, 2007
KITE RUNNER	KHALED HOSEINI	Riverhead Books (2003), Paperback	PS3406.H63256*	Mar 18, 2007
Babes and the Little Chinese Seamstress	Dai Sijie	Vintage (2003), Paperback, 276 pages	PQ2664.A4378151*	Mar 18, 2007
The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel (Penguin Classics)	Berbara Kingsolver	Harper Perennial Modern Classics (2005), Paperback, 576 pages	PS3561.S496 P46*	Mar 20, 2007
My Sister's Keeper: A Novel	Jodi Picoult	Washington Square Press (2005), Paperback, 448 pages	PS3566.L37298*	Mar 21, 2007
The Time Traveler's Wife	Audrey Niffenegger	Harcourt, Inc. (2003), Paperback	PS3566.L62756*	Mar 21, 2007
Secret Life of Bees	Sue Monk Kidd	HEADLINE (HKCD) (2006), Paperback, 304 pages	PS3811.L64038*	Mar 21, 2007
Girl with a Pearl Earring	Tracy Chevalier	HarperCollins Publishers Ltd (2003), Paperback, 305	PS3553.H6347 .G53*	Mar 21, 2007
A Trip To The Stars: A Novel	Nicholas Christoper	Tenthstone (2001), Paperback	PS1353.H754773*	Mar 21, 2007
Snow Flower and the Secret Fan: A Novel	Lisa See	Random House Trade Paperbacks (2006), Paperback, 238 pages	PS2569.E2334 .S64*	Mar 21, 2007
How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents (Essential Edition): (Plume Essential Edition)	Julia Alvarez	Plume (2005), Paperback, 304 pages	PS2551.L345 H66*	Mar 21, 2007
The Little Drummer Girl: A Novel	John le Carré	Scribner (2004), Paperback, 476 pages	PR4602.E33 L6*	Mar 21, 2007
A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail (Official Guides to the Appalachian Trail)	Bill Bryson	Broadway (1999), Paperback, 304 pages	F100 .B74*	Mar 21, 2007

A view of Your Library with ratings and more

## LibraryThing Founder Q&A: Tim Spaulding

When I first corresponded with **Tim Spaulding**, the founder of LibraryThing, he told me, "Recommendations algorithms are my secret passion. We've got five algorithms so far, and a few more I haven't brought live, or which lie underneath the current ones. It is a fascinating field. LibraryThing's data is particularly suited to it, the books you own being a much better representation of taste than the books you buy on a given retailer." Right then, I knew I was going to enjoy my interview with him. And I did.

**LibraryThing.com is feature-rich, providing robust cataloging features, recommendations, and a successful social component. How would you best describe this product to your potential customers?**

We have a continuum of people. It ranges from people just interested in cataloging their stuff, with the advantage being they can reach it anywhere. All the way to people who just want to check out books, review, recommendations, etc. Our "Tag Cloud" provides a certain sort of information about a book too. We often see people move from cataloging to more the social element when they see a person that has similar books.

**Do you see any other company as a competitor now that you're in "business"? How is your company different?**

The largest definition of this space now includes over forty sites. Twenty of the sites are really the same thing in some way. Some are in just one language. Generally speaking, except for one, they are using only Amazon for their cataloging feature. Most have an unintentional focus on friends. People want to replicate MySpace and Friendster.

The thing that makes social cataloging not social networking is this: their model is you're my friend/you're not my friend. Maybe you're a friend of a friend. Not that it's bad, but our concept is: I share forty books of architecture with you, but no novels. It's a more nuanced approach.

And we don't offer a Friends feature. The way you connect with people is actually not direct. I can benefit by looking at your catalog, but at no point do I have to message the person. I can connect in many different ways; through tastes, etc. This is a somewhat different model of how you can connect. Most of the sites have a Friendster application. Goodreads, for example, does that. Most sites are light on the cataloging features.

That being said, there might be a possibility for something more lightweight within LibraryThing for the younger crowd. For example, while others provide pictures, we provide names. There's a generational thing going on. VOX, a blogging software and social network, has a lightweight cataloging application. Making

LibraryThing available as a widget for example for blogs, showing "what I'm reading this week," has legs.

**Who are the people visiting the site? What demographics? Why do they want to use it?**

We're a small company with two developers and we haven't had the time really to measure in detail what's been happening. We have 160,000 registered members. A significant number came and cataloged a few books. The core of those participating is smaller. There are 30,000-40,000 that are actively engaged. A larger group came, saw it, and then, six months later, when all their friends were using it, came back. The network effect has been very powerful.

When LibraryThing launched, we told a couple of bloggers it was available. We thought it would be just people cataloging their books, maybe five a day. There were a few sites at the time that let you add items from Amazon, but, if you're over the age of 25 and not a philistine, you own books that are no longer in print. Having access to the Library of Congress lets you catalog all of those books in your collection. Now we have a mixed crew of members. We have a lot of professors and folks from across the sea. Librarians latched onto LibraryThing immediately and I've been doing a lot of speaking at events like the American Library Association, etc. In our group feature, the librarians group is our largest with 1800 members. Most of our members are book lovers. And the site is going strong.

**Can you tell us more about the choices you make to leverage outside content such as Amazon reviews? How do you determine what to include?**

We're open to virtually anyone and anything as long as it's fun. We want to be the doorway to that fun.

**Let's talk about the algorithms used for recommendations. Do you have any stats on which is more heavily used? Are you using a proprietary technology to do so or off-the-shelf?**

Some people use the recommendations and some don't. What should be better right now are our recommendations

based on your whole library. Right now, we take them one by one and give you recommendations. But we should specifically use patterns of your choices and give recommendations based on that. When we went live, we had 10,000 records, but with 12 million records things run slower with these higher numbers. I do the algorithms myself. I really like to do these algorithms because they're fun and I enjoy working with statistics. As for our tag clouds, they are randomly good and bad. A classic bad tag example is "leather," which is either about erotica or book binding.

**Can you tell us a little bit about the technology you use? Was it developed in-house?**

All the technology was and is developed in-house. Our Special Sauce Recommendation engine is the only one we don't talk about how it works. But, suffice it to say, that simple statistics work pretty well. Our combo recommendations "smooshed together" is what we're licensing out. If our tag thing goes crazy, though, some things might not come up at the top as we'd expect them to. Our Special Sauce recommendations are weighted more heavily, as is fiction over nonfiction as well.

Statistics can go only so far, though. Sometimes you have to fix statistics until they make you happy. Combo is combined from all five algorithms — five different versions with different weightings. I give new algorithms out to others and employees to test and make modifications based on what we learn.

**Let's talk about partnerships. AbeBooks is first. How did the launch go? Anything new you can talk about yet?**

We're going to partner with libraries and with some commercial ventures. For example, our recommendations are great for a store like AbeBooks, which focuses on out-of-print books. AbeBooks can't use Amazon as the basis for their recommendation engine because Amazon doesn't carry any of the books AbeBooks does. LibraryThing is more about the long tail — not just about what you're buying this week, but what you're holding on to. As an illustration, on Amazon you get five other *Harry Potter* books when you enter one to get recommendations, but on LibraryThing you get a few of these and then a *Wrinkle in Time*, which, though maybe not selling well this week, appears in because others had that in their collection with *Harry Potter*, too.

(Text continued from page 26)

account settings and noticed a box highlighting users who appeared on my profile page as Users With Your Books. It shows how many books that I own which they also own, and then how many books they have in their collection in total. So, I clicked into a few. I wasn't immediately drawn to the information in their profiles. But I enjoyed looking to see what books we had in common and then moving on to see the Random Books From His Library. LibraryThing lets you add that person to your "Watchlist" to see what new books he or she enters. You can even add an RSS feed or html page of that user's newly added books, reviews, or the reviews of his or her books by other people.

Each book page also gives you a list of recommendations based on the book. And, boy, are they good!

## Book Recommendations

### Book Suggester

<http://www.librarything.com/suggester>

The recommendation engine uses a proprietary set of algorithms to derive six different sets of recommendations for each book. Each page lists the top 10 with a link to more. The choices include two flavors of "People With This Book Also Have ..." Amazon recommendations, "Books With Similar Tags," "Special Sauce Recommendations," and "Books with Similar Library Subjects and Classifications" (which mines what LibraryThing knows about library-assigned subjects, mostly Library of Congress Subject Headings), Library of Congress Classifications (LCC), and the Dewey Decimal Classifications (DDC).

It is amazing to see how different these results are. You can literally spend hours exploring the various selections. For each book presented in a list, LibraryThing also shows you how many members own the book. You can instantly link to suggestions

for any of the books. You can also link to information about authors on pages that include not only the books they've authored, but also conversations about the author, user ratings on their books, and specific users who own their books.

### **Library Suggester**

<http://www.librarything.com/recommendations>

If you've taken the time to add some book titles to create your own library, LibraryThing can provide recommendations based on your entire collection. You have a variety of choices: "People with your books also

have: fiction/non-fiction books"; "Similarly-tagged books: fiction/non-fiction"; "Special-sauce recommendations: fiction/non-fiction"; and "Most popular books you don't have: fiction/non-fiction."

I didn't find the recommendations based on my library as compelling as those based on a single book. I'm not sure why. It could be that my collection as a whole is either too small to be useful (I've only entered in 20 of my titles) or perhaps too eclectic a grouping to produce useful recommendations. But, Tim Spaulding, the founder of LibraryThing, notes in the Q&A on pp.

28–29 that this is an area he feels needs improvement. And considering the amazing job he has done site-wide, I have no doubt this too will be an incredible feature when he's done with it.

### **Unsuggester**

<http://www.librarything.com/unsuggester>

LibraryThing also provides a feature called Unsuggester. This is literally a search that comes back with books "least likely to share a library with the book you suggest." My guess is that this is more for fun or novelty than for utility. But it does produce some amusing results.

## **AbeBooks COO Q&A** *Boris Wertz*

**Tell us how the response has been to the launch of the LibraryThing recommendation engine on AbeBooks? Is it being used? Are you getting any feedback about it?**

The LibraryThing recommendations (called "BookHints" on AbeBooks) have received very positive feedback from AbeBooks customers. People like that the recommendations are not based on customer purchases on AbeBooks, but on customer preferences for books that these booklovers have bought through different channels or been given as a gift. It is based on books other people really like and not books other people have bought without knowing if they would like the book or not.

**Did you previously have any recommendation option on the site? What led you to wanting to add an engine?**

We didn't have any recommendation engine on our site before. AbeBooks was typically a very good site for searching (and still is) if a customer knows exactly what he is looking for. AbeBooks offers the best access to millions of new, used, rare, and out-of-print books made available by over 13,000 independent booksellers worldwide. The LibraryThing recommendation engine now helps us to also offer a "browse" option — the customer can discover books he wouldn't have thought about in the first place. We see this as a strategic development for AbeBooks which will grow in importance over time, as we increase the coverage of LibraryThing recommendations on AbeBooks.

**Have you seen an increase in sales since its launch or any other increase in traffic to your site?**

We have seen not only an increase in traffic due to the positive reception we got in the blogosphere, but also an increase of the number of items an average AbeBooks customer buys on our site. And therefore we are very happy with the initial success of the product. We will now focus on increasing the coverage of the recommendations on our site, as well as making the access easier for our customers.

## **Miscellaneous Other Features**

I know I must have missed something with all the many features on the site. I discover new features every time I use LibraryThing. That said, here are a few more features worth mentioning:

**Search:** Search your own collection (title, tag, or all fields) and/or the collections on LibraryThing as a whole (works, authors, tags, or users/user locations).

**Zeitgeist:** This section offers statistics and links to who uses LibraryThing (their profile pages); what authors, what libraries exist, who reviews books the most, what groups are most active, etc. There's a page for the top books on LibraryThing by various different criteria; top Tags and top Users appear to be coming (links visible but not yet live) and by language and even a Helper page that gives you a sense of who contributes the most to the site's content. This really interesting information gives you a sense of the diversity and size of the community on LibraryThing.

**Groups:** This section provides links to the various groups or discussions on LibraryThing, providing information about the most active ones, the newest ones, the groups in different languages, and more.

Creating a group is easy to do from a link on the page; you can decide whether it should be public or private and whether it should include a discussion or not. These groups gather members around book topics, as well as life subjects such as tea or travel.

**My Profile and Tags:** I don't want to go into detail on the relative merit of using tags. The drawbacks of tagging are obvious; accuracy, integrity and other content issues abound. However, the functionality is there to use. Browse by tag frequency (how often it appears) or alphabetically to see inside the collections on LibraryThing. Or visit an author cloud or tag cloud created for your profile. (Per Wikipedia, "A Tag Cloud is a text-based depiction of tags across a body of content to show frequency of tag usage and enable topic browsing. In general, the more commonly used tags are displayed with a larger font or stronger emphasis. Each term in the tag cloud is a link to the collection of items that have that tag.") Another nice feature, called an Author Gallery, displays photos, if available, of the authors in your collection. Finally, Fun Statistics gives you information about your collection, such as average dates of the books, ratings, etc.

**Tools:** This section provides a variety of ways to give people access to your collection or profile on LibraryThing from elsewhere. For example, the ability to add a "Widget" to your blog or Web site that displays your books, authors, or tags from your collection, or permits a visitor to search your collection on LibraryThing. You can add a "Thingie" to your blog or Web site to link a visitor to your profile or collection. The Tools page has endless additional items, all the way from information about APIs and "easy linking" to a way to give a lifetime membership and even purchase LibraryThing bags, mugs, etc., in the Café Press store.

## Other Book Recommendation Engines

There are easily 30, 40, or more sites that currently do some of the many things that LibraryThing does well. A list of relevant sites appears on Steven Abram's site at [http://stephenslighthouse.sirsiidynix.com/archives/2006/09/book\\_recommenda\\_1.html](http://stephenslighthouse.sirsiidynix.com/archives/2006/09/book_recommenda_1.html).

I could not highlight them all here, but I did want to give some

list of choices ranked with the highest percent match by storycode, then a reader rating by star, readability rating, and recommended age for the reader, followed by an option to buy the book.

My experience with recommendations on this site was mixed. On the one hand, the recommendations led me to new books or books I hadn't considered reading. On

Before I discovered LibraryThing, StoryCode.com was the only other site with a recommendation engine that I'd used to find new books.

"honorable" mentions to a few sites for some very specific reasons.

**StoryCode.com**  
<http://www.storycode.com>

Before I discovered LibraryThing, StoryCode.com was the only other site with a recommendation engine that I'd used to find new books. This site asks you to "storycode" the books you've read, to rate the readability of the book, the universality of its application to the lives of people around the world, and how much the narrative is driven by the characters or the plot. You're then presented with a list of questions for ranking that deal with the genre, the characters, plot, plot type, morality, story resolution, setting and atmosphere, and your personal views regarding who would enjoy the book. It takes a long time to go through this process for a book, even though the ranking uses a simple sliding scale.

These storycodes then provide the basis for making recommendations. When you enter a book title to get recommendations, you get a nice

the other hand, in many cases, the books were meant for a younger audience. The books recommended for ages "18+," for whatever reason, either weren't as plentiful or as interesting to me as those recommended for "15+." But the "15+" books were the subject of high school reading lists and not appropriate or challenging enough reading for my age group (40+). This result could have stemmed in part because I didn't have the time or patience to use the long list of criteria required to enter a storycode. If that is true for the majority of adults, then the number of books entered for the "18+" crowd is likely far fewer than perhaps the younger age groups.

**GoodReads.com**  
<http://www.Goodreads.com>

This site is light on substance, but big on faces or connections. GoodReads appears to be the "MySpace" of books and has a slogan that reads, "It's What Your Friends Are Reading." I mention it because



people who do like connecting with people who like similar books will like the ease of use at this site and its focus on connecting friends and making new ones. The site makes it very easy to add your books and rate the books at the same time. It's easy to invite your friends to join the site too. If they do, when you ask for recommendations, you can then see what's popular on the site as a whole as well as among your friends. "Meet People" gives you a list of people (and their pictures) who are online at the time in your own country and worldwide. But there's no question, this site is light on book-related functionality and heavy on meeting and greeting.

### Books We Like

<http://www.bookswelike.net/tag/food>

I'm not particularly fond of the functionality or ease-of-use of this site, but it offers the proceeds from any purchase to benefit not-for-profit causes. When you make a purchase, you may identify a charity to be the recipient of the proceeds from the sale. This is a really nice touch and the site should get credit for doing it.

### What Are You Going to Read Next?

Armed with my list from Library-Thing, my last book selection meeting for our book club was a hit. Together, my group whittled the list down to nine books we all agreed

could be great. So, if you're curious what we're going to read this year or are struggling with new selections for your own book club, visit <http://jenniestarr.com/bookclub.htm> to check out our selections for 2007. Feel free to read along with us ... but definitely make time to visit Library-Thing on your own. It is by far my favorite find this year and a must for book lovers everywhere. ♦

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