
Book swapping goes global: BookCrossing and BookMooch

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What is a used book worth? Unless you're the kind of person who hoards every paperback to read again in retirement, you probably find your used books a burden. They collect in boxes for that big garage sale, or get taken to the charity shop to swell the groaning shelves there. However, you know all the time that somebody out there somewhere would really love that tattered copy of *The Little Bush Maid*, if only you could get in touch with them.

Now you can. Thanks to a few altruists, there are an increasing number of sites on the web where someone who has a book to give away or swap can get in touch with someone who wants it. Most of these are local -- confined to one region or one country -- but there are several world-wide sites. There are two of these that I want to look at in detail: BookCrossing and BookMooch.

Readers interested in other sites can find an up-to-date list at Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_swapping), but be warned -- with the exception of PaperBackSwap and Bookins, both of which are limited to the United States, most other sites appear to offer a very limited number of books. Search before joining, not after!

BOOKCROSSING

The BookCrossing phenomenon started in 2001 when Ron Hornbaker, a software developer in the United States, decided to set up a website to track discarded books (<http://www.bookcrossing.com>). Members join BookCrossing for free and choose a "screen name" under which they are to be known. When they finish with a book, they can register its details on the BookCrossing site and the book is then given a unique ID number. The ID number and the BookCrossing website address are written on the book's inside cover and the book is then left in a "public place".

If the book is picked up by someone (other than the garbage collector, that is) its new owner can look up the ID number on the BookCrossing website and see who owned the book last, and what their comments on it were. They can add their own comments anonymously or join BookCrossing themselves, so they can keep track of what happens to the book when they too pass it on. In this way books can pick up a long history of owners and adventures.

BookCrossing has developed its own terminology; members talk about "releasing books to the wild" and "caught" releases. The site claims more than 100,000 members, with forums for discussion, local member get-togethers and joint projects -- providing books for a library in Ghana, for instance. The site claims that 300 new members join each day -- although the attrition rate is not shown -- and the total number of people who have joined at one time or another is over 500,000.

The BookCrossing site is very slickly maintained, with advertising for funding and an online shop that sells printed BC bookplates as well as "Release Kits", rubber stamps and other merchandise. There is an area for user "testimonials", as well as detailed tables that record the number of books "released" at various locations, with links to the members responsible. There are "official drop zones", where members come to release or find books, like spies in Cold War novels. There is a Yahoo group as well as a local forum, and a series of BookCrossing conventions -- including one in Wellington, New Zealand, on 16-18 February 2007.

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FIGURE 1: BookCrossing Home Page

The screenshot shows the BookCrossing.com homepage. At the top, there's a navigation menu with links like 'home', 'join bookcrossing', 'about bookcrossing', 'faq', 'press and media', 'news', 'management team', 'privacy policy', and 'contact us'. The main heading is 'Welcome to BookCrossing!' with a sub-heading 'Did you catch a book?' and a message: 'Whoa! Ho! Ho! Here's a new way to say, using its ISBN number, book to the front cover!'. Below this is a search bar with 'ISBN:' and a 'Go!' button. The 'Latest BookCrossing News' section lists several articles, including 'Digital Content, Content, Content: Our New Video Clips Are Live!', 'Creative Commons BookCrossing Awards for 2006', and 'BookCrossing Commission in Charleston: Filling the Field, Reversing, Four Steps and Meet the Founders!'. The 'What makes BookCrossing the World's Biggest Book Club?' section defines bookcrossing as 'the practice of leaving a book in a public place to be picked up and read by others, who do the likewise' and mentions it was listed in the Guinness World Records in August 2004. A sidebar on the right contains a 'Join BookCrossing Now!' button, a Google search bar, and various links like 'Home', 'About', 'FAQ', 'Press', 'News', 'Management Team', 'Privacy Policy', and 'Contact Us'.

Australasians have embraced the BookCrossing concept wholeheartedly – in the last 30 days, the site shows, 2,655 books were “released” in Australia and 365 in New Zealand (compare about 4,000 in Germany and the United Kingdom and 12,000 in the United States). To me, unfortunately, the whole thing seemed a little too self-congratulatory. After all, people have been giving books away for centuries without making a big song and dance about it. However, for those who want to keep tabs on their books after they leave the nest, and like to feel they are part of one big book-swapping community, BookCrossing may be the answer.

BOOKMOOCH

After the BookCrossing site, BookMooch (<http://www.bookmooch.com>) seems quite Spartan by comparison. The home page has a whimsical illustration, but apart from that it is very business-like. Like BookCrossing, joining is free, and members require a username and a password. They can say something about themselves and indicate whether they are willing to send books overseas. However, there are no ads, no charity projects and no company store – yet.

Having joined, BookMooch members can list the books that they want to dispose of on the site – their “inventory”. Other members can then search for these by topic, author or title. If they find a book or books they want they can request that the owner post them the items. In return the sender acquires “points” which he/she can use to mooch books from others. The sender pays the postage, which can add up to \$20 or more for overseas postings from Australia, but in return can receive books which might otherwise required an expensive trip to Amazon.com or a lot of browsing in second-hand bookshops.

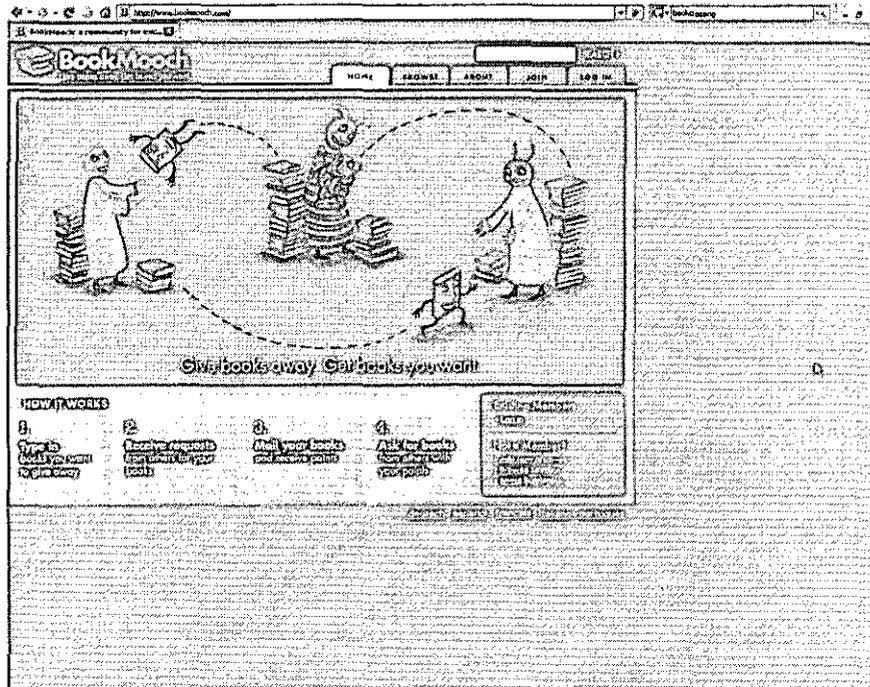
BookMooch was founded by John Buckman, another United States web developer and entrepreneur, who also runs the music distribution site MagnaTune and is a director of the Creative Commons group. It was started in mid-2006 and has been growing steadily ever since. The number of registered members is around 20,000 and the total number of books exchanged is nearly 100,000 – a real financial boon for postal organisations all over the world.

Part of the success of BookMooch is due to its careful allocation of points. Members receive one-tenth of a point for every book they list. Mooching a book costs one point if it is sent locally, two points if it is sent from overseas. Giving a book earns you one point locally, three points for an

overseas recipient. Therefore, someone sending two books from Australia to England, is entitled to ask for six local books or three overseas ones in return. Your promptness and the condition of the books you send is reflected in a "feedback score", like the ones at eBay. Members must send at least one book out for every five they receive.

Another plus for the site is a seamless link to the Amazon system. This means, for instance, that just entering the ISBN of a book usually retrieves all its other details from Amazon's database, avoiding the need to enter it all manually. In addition, like BookCrossing, BookMooch allows you to establish links with other members that you have things in common with.

FIGURE 2: BookMooch Home Page



I have been using BookMooch now for over six months and have been very pleased with it. Most books arrive promptly, though there are exceptions; one that I had given up for lost turned up about six weeks later after travelling who knows where. I have been able to track down books that I have never even seen in Australia, much less been able to buy. Transactions that don't work can be rescinded – as in the strange case of the book I sent to Canada which was opened in transit and replaced with another one altogether!

BookMooch is a work in progress; Buckman is an active participant in the forums and often implements the advice he gets from users. Some features, like the "Browse" option, are fairly crude and need a good deal of tightening up; however, the basic components work extremely well. Some storage space is required for the books in one's inventory, but after a few months one realises which books are never going to shift. They go to Lifeline in the usual way -- at least mine do; others may want to try them on BookCrossing. Also, as the number of members increases, the proportion of utterly unwanted books should drop.

CONCLUSION

You can tell a book swapping system is working when publishers start to attack it. BookCrossing in particular has been described by publishers as "the Napster of the book trade". BookMooch has avoided criticism so far but, if it continues to grow at its current rate, it won't be long before it too starts to make publishers edgy.

Physical second-hand bookshops are closing down everywhere. It makes increasingly good sense to go with the flow and look for their online equivalents.