

FESTIVAL WEBSITES

Jon Jerney

Writers' festivals now reach out to their audiences through the Web. I examined the websites of four major festivals to see how they approach the task.

The Sydney Writers' Festival (www.swf.org.au) opens with a clean white layout featuring the Harbour Bridge and Opera House. The current festival (May 2010) takes centre stage but podcasts and pictures from last year are still in the main menu at the left of the screen.

There are appeals for donations, calls for volunteers, a Media Room for press releases and even a page of Frequently Asked Questions, although, as usual, my most FAQ – How much does it cost? – doesn't appear there. Archive information includes programs back to 2003, and festivals from 2005 onwards can be searched for particular events, writers or dates. The website is slick, though a little sparse, but in general this is a smooth, professional job.

Melbourne Writers' Festival (www.mwf.com.au) actually describes its full history in a page linked from 'About us' on the main menu, but ironically the archived records of former festivals are much harder to find: users have to guess the URL (e.g. www.mwf.com.au/2006) or try a Google search.

The MWF site also includes podcasts, but the picture gallery has been relegated to the bottom of the home page. There is a text-based search box, but this year's program (starting in late August) isn't up yet. The layout is a little friendlier but in general the site is harder to navigate than its Sydney cousin.

The Byron Bay Writers' Festival (www.byronbaywritersfestival.com.au) has an attractive, rather otherworldly graphic, and although the 2010 program (starting in August) is not yet up, visitors can browse through last year's offerings by date. These take the form of PDF files rather than web pages, though – a black mark there.

Photos from 2009 are presented as a gallery and slideshow and neither these nor the podcasts are searchable, though with only 14 podcasts so far this is not an issue yet. Very elegant, though more integration and better searchability would be nice.

The site for the National Young Writers' Festival in Newcastle (www.youngwritersfestival.org) is far less sedate, with an appealing graphic labelled 'This is not art' and a call to participate in "fiery debates, invaluable workshops, bigger literary explosions and a general mash-up of interactive art-making goodness". The 2009 program is still up and offers more detail than those above. With lots of hyperlinks, it's clearly designed for the web.

Other sites include Brisbane (www.brisbanewritersfestival.com.au), Perth (www.perthfestival.com.au – it's animated!) and Adelaide (www.adelaidefestival.com.au)

All are clean, clear, navigable and professionally designed. Our festival organisers clearly have the web well in hand.

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writers online

Accessing eBooks

○ **WHERE ARE THE FREE eBooks?** The primary source of free eBooks is Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org). Most of the classics are here, plus a large assortment of nostalgic, historically significant or just plain quirky books. Gutenberg Australia has its own site (gutenberg.net.au) with specifically Australian eBooks, plus some which are not legally in the public domain in the USA. The Canadian Gaslight site (gaslight.mtroyal.ab.ca) has best-sellers from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including some local material. Other free sites offer texts from Gutenberg reformatted in various ways. One of these is ManyBooks (manybooks.net).

○ **WHAT CAN I BUY?** The most generic site for eBooks is Fictionwise (www.fictionwise.com) with a wide range of genres and formats, including audio books and – despite the name – non-fiction. eBooks can also be found at CyberRead (cyberread.com), Ebooks.com, Ebook Express (www.ebookexpress.com), Rosetta Books (www.rosettabooks.com), Diesel eBooks (www.diesel-ebooks.com) and Ebook Mall (www.ebookmall.com), and others. Baen Books (www.baen.com) offers many science fiction and fantasy eBooks to their readers via a subscription service at www.webscription.net.

○ **WHAT ABOUT SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS?** Self-publishing is alive and well on the web. Lulu (www.lulu.com) allows aspiring authors to offer their works electronically or via print-on-demand. Some out-of-copyright material by well-known authors can also be found here.

○ **ARE PUBLISHERS ISSUING eBooks?** Penguin has been quickest off the mark with eBooks. Start searching at tinyurl.com/m77yq. ContentLink (www.contentlinkinc.com) is an eBook distributor specialising in books from Random House. Macmillan are taking eBooks seriously enough to develop their own new distribution system. Called BookStore, this will allow potential customers to browse through and purchase massive amounts of digital content, including Macmillan eBooks. No release date has yet been given.

○ **WHAT ABOUT GOOGLE AND AMAZON?** Google Book Search allows users to find specific snippets of text within the millions of books that Google has scanned from libraries. Many of the books can then be purchased – on paper – from sources like Amazon. Publishers are reporting increased sales as a result, and an extension to eBook purchasing would be a natural sequel. But in the legally-fraught world of eBooks, nothing happens quickly.

JON JERMEY has written and published several eBooks which are available through Lulu.
Contact via jon@webindexing.biz.

Creative Commons: a Clayton's copyright

All writers accumulate stuff they can't sell. Old letters; juvenilia; ephemeral articles on events of the day.

Unmarketable material like this cries out to be put on the Internet, so that others might have the benefit of it: but what are the copyright consequences?

The kinds of 'misuse' writers are concerned about run from straight theft to distortion, parody and even inappropriate context (your words on a race hate website, say). But copyright enforcement is all-or-nothing: you pursue every abuse, or you are fair game. The international Creative Commons system separates out the rights implied in copyright, and allows a creator to assert only some of these. Creative Commons is free, widely supported and thoroughly documented: if you apply a Creative Commons license to your work any potential user can immediately see what they are allowed to do with it.

Creative Commons licences are as follows:

1. Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives. Anyone can duplicate your work in full but not sell it. The work must be attributed to you.
2. Attribution No Derivatives. Like no. 1, but includes commercial use. Anyone can duplicate and give away or sell your work in full, but it must be attributed.
3. Attribution Non-commercial Share Alike. Anyone can quote or manipulate your work for non-commercial purposes and distribute the results, as long as they attribute the original to you. Their derivative works must be under the same licence; they can't prevent others from going on to make further copies and derivations.
4. Attribution Share Alike. Like number 3, but with commercial use; anyone can quote or manipulate your work and give away or sell the results as long as they attribute the original to you. Anyone obtaining their derivative work can go on to manipulate and sell it in the same way.
5. Attribution Non-commercial. Like number 3, but users don't have to put their derivative works under the same licence; they can prevent further reproduction and use of their derivative material.
6. Attribution. Users can essentially do anything they like with your work if they attribute the original to you.

Confused? creativecommons.org explains these rights and how to apply them. It includes convenient logos which you can put on your website and which link back to descriptions of what each right entails.

Creative Commons doesn't help with enforcement; if someone is persistently abusing your rights then it's up to you to call in the legal eagles. But it does ensure that they (and you) know exactly what those rights are.

JON JERMEY (jon@webindexing.biz) is an Internet journalist and indexer.

What is fan fiction?

○WHAT IS FAN FICTION? Ever seen a movie, finished a book or watched a TV show, and said 'I could have written that better'? Fan fiction ('Fanic' to the initiated) happens when people put that urge into practice. Adopting characters and situations from existing books and shows, they weave them into their own reality. What would happen if *Oliver Twist* had become a gang boss, if Harry had never met Sally, if Bilbo had kept the Ring? Fan fiction runs the gamut of respectability, from published sequels and pastiches like *The Wind Done Gone* through to steamy pornographic encounters between unlikely couples. In between is a vast and varied collection of re-takes, send-ups and follow-ups. Fanic now has an enduring presence on the Web.

○WHY WRITE IT? Fanic authors have varied motivations, but certain themes recur. Adolescent angst is a popular topic. Bringing back dead characters is another. And many pieces bring in a god-like protagonist of their own in order to put wrong things right — a 'Mary Sue' in fanfic parlance. Fanic is often about power; the power to rewrite.

○WHERE CAN I FIND IT? Wikipedia has a good introduction, with hyperlinks. Really popular series — Harry Potter and Star Trek, for instance — have their own sites with tens of thousands of items. For an overview of the others, Fanic.net is a good place to start. The Fanic Books section alone has about three hundred categories, with anything up to several thousand entries in each one. Science fiction and fantasy dominates, but the list includes Dickens, Homer and Dumas as well as Tolkien and Robert Heinlein. The collection includes poetry and screenplays based on novels, modern reworkings, alternate endings and parodies. Then there are 'crossovers', stories blending characters from two or more different sources.

○IS IT ANY GOOD? About the same as any publisher's slush pile. Apostrophes are in short supply. Some contributors have read Dickens in bulk without absorbing any grammar, spelling or construction skills. Others produce respectable recounts in modern prose. A few capture the spirit of the original, and one or two have come up with something startling.

○HOW DO AUTHORS FEEL? Some are enthusiastic supporters; some are horrified. A few even see it as a threat to their income. But most authors seem to regard it with amusement. After all, as Jane Eyre says in *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, 'The only thing worse than being written about is not being written about.' That's in my fanfic version, of course.

JON JERMEY founded and moderates the *Golden Age of Detective Fiction* mailing list and Wiki.

Library thing

LibraryThing (www.librarything.com) is a community of book lovers based around a website. Since its foundation by Tim Spalding in 2005, LibraryThing has accumulated 305,000 members who between them have catalogued over two-and-a-half million separate books. A starter membership is free and allows the user to enter up to 200 books: beyond that users can pay \$US10 per year or \$US25 for a life membership.

At the heart of LibraryThing is each user's personal book catalogue. These are relatively easy to add, as LibraryThing is linked to both Amazon.com and the Library of Congress, and can add details from these once a book is found. If your books are already in an electronic list this can be uploaded directly.

Once the book is entered, a user can add information to its listing. This may include keyword tags, a review (or a link to a review), and other comments. Users can also record when they acquired the book and when (or if) they read it.

From an author's perspective LibraryThing is a great way of keeping in touch with readers. Authors can enter their own books and quickly track down those other members who have them. Users can comment on each other's choices and invite others to join a Friends list, allowing for direct communication. LibraryThing also hosts many ongoing bulletin-board type 'conversations', and when these refer to a particular book or author, a link to that conversation is automatically made on that author's page.

Writers with books on Amazon.com or in a recognized library have the option of becoming 'official LibraryThing authors'. This means that you can decorate your LibraryThing page with a little yellow badge and – more importantly – have it linked to the Author field when a user enters one of your books. An enterprising author can thus quickly build up an impressive array of links.

As the co-author of a technical book, it's a little depressing – though unsurprising – to see that only two other LibraryThing members have copies, but I score much better with some of the Golden Age detective stories in my collection. Most popular books at the moment are the Harry Potter series – no surprise there – but it's nice to see that *Pride and Prejudice*, *Animal Farm* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are in the top 25 too. Local references were scarcer, but a tag search for 'Australia' turned up classics like *The Fatal Shore* and *The Thorn Birds* as well as some more contemporary fiction. Want to try some viral marketing, or just get all touchie-feelie with some of your readers? In either case LibraryThing is a great tool at an unbeatable price.

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Australian poetry websites

MODERN AUSTRALIAN POETRY IS ALIVE AND WELL on the Web. In addition to the personal websites maintained by luminaries like John Tranter (johntranter.com) and Les Murray (lesmurray.org) there are several sites which function as online poetry magazines, taking submissions and publishing material on a regular or occasional basis. Four of the best of these are:

Hutt (www.papertigermedia.com/hutt) is a webzine sponsored by boutique publishers Paper Tiger Media. The editor is Paul Hardacre and the designer Marissa Newell. Sparse but attractive, Hutt currently provides twenty-one small collections of postmodernist poems accompanied by evocative photographs of buildings ('huts' – get it?) and brief biographies of the authors. A submissions guide is provided which belies the seriousness of most of the works and describes Hutt as 'a darn cute little home for poetry'.

The Cordite Poetry Review (www.cordite.org.au) is more conventionally styled, using the Wordpress blogging software. Cordite's latest issue is themed 'Secret Cities', though each issue also contains unrelated poems. Cordite has a more formal submissions policy than Hutt, and also allows users to subscribe in order to receive news about the site via email. The subscriptions page pledges that they will not pass your email address on to 'llama wranglers' or 'liturgical dancers', among others.

Divan (www.bhtafe.edu.au/Centres/VocationalAccessandEducation/Divan) is a poetry webzine produced by Box Hill Institute of TAFE in Melbourne. The six issues – containing about eighty poems each – have all been put together by different design teams, resulting in dramatic variations in style between the editions. This is hard work – perhaps too hard, as the most recent was August 2006. Earl Livings, himself a poet, is the editor.

Jacket (jacketmagazine.com), edited by John Tranter, doesn't waste space on banners or home page links, but heads straight for content. There are features, articles, reviews and interviews as well as links to poetry. The current edition – number thirty-six – contains about twenty-five poems; the previous edition nearly sixty, including translations from the Russian and Spanish as well as originals. As with Divan, recent issues of Jacket have diverse designs, beguiling the reader into exploring them for their own sake as well as that of the material. The impetus for this appears to have come from Pam Brown, another poet, who has acted as guest or associate editor for most of these. So what are you waiting for? Jump in!

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Do you read me? Three eBook features that may change your life

eBooks have been 'the coming thing' for as long as most of us can remember. But three technological developments have paved the way for a real challenge to paper books: text-to-speech capability, low-power screen displays and mobile wireless access to downloadable media. Put them together in a (rather ugly) package and you have the Kindle II, Amazon's latest assault on the eBook reader market.

What makes these features special? Let's start with text-to-speech. Until now, if you wanted to absorb a book while driving or jogging as well as at your desk, you needed a printed copy and an audiobook version, plus player. Computers have had text-to-speech software for years, but the Kindle is the first handheld device that can read aloud. The book that you peruse at the breakfast table can read itself to you in the car, or read you to sleep at night. After lobbying from the US Authors' Guild, text-to-speech has been made optional: eBook distributors can decide whether to include it or not. But since it adds value at no extra cost, I can't see too many publishers holding back.

Low-power screen displays resolve another major complaint about eBook devices – expiring batteries. Fumbling with AA cells, finding the right cable to plug in – battery issues are a big turnoff for potential eBook users. The proprietary E-Ink technology in the Kindle, and now finding its way into many other devices, only uses power when the display changes – eg, when a page is turned. That makes it much less power-hungry and allows it to run for days rather than hours. No need to drag around chargers or spare batteries!

Finally, wi-fi downloads. In the US, once your Amazon account is set up and your Kindle registered, you have free access to a country-wide cellular network. This will connect you up to the world's biggest bookstore from pretty much anywhere. If a topical issue or an author's name catches your eye, if you've a project to do or a problem to fix, you can have a eBook on the subject downloaded to your Kindle in a few minutes. It's impulse-buyer heaven. And the connection includes internet access, so that Wikipedia, for instance, is only a few button-presses away.

Individually each technology is impressive. Taken together, they add up to an astonishing achievement. The dominance of paper books is looking shakier all the time.

Jon Jermey (jon@webindexing.biz) is a trainer and indexer. His book, *Bitten by a Penguin: Windows for Linux Users*, is available from www.lulu.com.

BOOK REVIEW SITES

BOOK REVIEW SITES ARE ALIVE AND WELL ON the web. Here are a few examples:

WebWombat: <www.webwombat.com.au/entertainment/books/index.htm> Wombats are survivors: WebWombat has been around for a century in Internet years. It provides a pleasant tabbed interface and a sparse but nicely presented list of book reviews in reverse chronological order. The reviews are uncredited and appear to be the work of individual contributors. Some are merely rewordings of the book blurb, but others show insight and a few dare to be critical. The reviews include links to sites where the books can be bought.

Book Reviews by Danny Yee: <dannyreviews.com>. Danny Yee's reviews are accessible by title, date or subject. The reviews range from 200 words up to nearly a thousand, and appear at a rate of roughly one a week. Danny does not solicit review copies, but does provide funded links to Amazon where the books can be purchased. His reviews are short, readable and to the point. His explanation of how and why he came to be doing this also makes interesting reading.

The Australian book reviews: <tinyurl.com/maad28>. Drawn from the newspaper and listed in reverse chronological order, this site includes Graeme Blundell's crime fiction review column. The individual reviews are excellent, but the collection is marred by the lack of a separate search or browsing facility.

Australian Book Review online: <home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/>. Website for the magazine, which for some reason provides the reviews only in downloadable PDF format. Three or four reviews are provided from each issue, and there is a complete index by author provided for each year – although not, alas, cumulatively.

Sydney Morning Herald book reviews: <tinyurl.com/n6udg9>. Contains links to the latest 'reviews', although some of these are really just backgrounder stories. Earlier reviews have dropped off into the limbo of general archives, and there is no separate book review search facility. But if your attention span only extends back three months, you may find what you want here.

The Golden Age of Detective Fiction Wiki: <gadetection.pbworks.com>. Brilliant and ever-growing collection of author information and reviews of classic mysteries. What more can I say? I set it up.

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WEBCOMICS

Jon Jermey

Most popular paper-based comic strips get on to the web eventually, including classics like *Li'l Abner* by Al Capp and *Dick Tracy* by Chester Gould. But the first web-specific comic to make it big was *Argon Zark* (1995) by Charley Parker, which combined superb graphics, witty dialogue and an intriguing plot. Since then hundreds of new webcomics have come and gone like fireworks, and some memorable – and occasionally profitable – works have been produced. Long-running strips like *Girl Genius* by Phil Foglio, *XKCD* by Randall Munro, *Pibgorn* by Brooke McEldowney, *Narbonic* by Shaenon K. Garrity, *PS238* by Aaron Williams and *Sequential Art* by Philip M. Jackson all demonstrate in very different ways the power of the medium.

Though the main game is in the US, some Australian artists and writers are developing a global reputation. Prominent local strips include:

Doc Rat by Jenner (<www.docrat.com.au>) – a long-running character-based saga of a GP in a world of talking animals. The Australian flavour is mild and the humour is gentle. *Bigger Than Cheeses* (<www.biggercheese.com>) by Desmond Seah takes a sharper approach: its hero is a computer-savvy male with a wide grasp of popular culture who has trouble relating to the people around him (sound familiar?). *BladeKitten* by Steve Stamatidis (<www.bladekitten.com>) is a manga-style sci-fi story. The graphics are wonderful but the dialogue leaves a little to be desired. Alas, artists who can write – or writers who can draw – are still thin on the ground.

Gang of Awesomes by Josh Niczynski (<www.gangofawesomes.com>) is 'an existentialist retard-story that doesn't take itself seriously'. The artwork is grim and spare, but it has an appealing lunacy. *Monstar* by Jacen Carpenter (www.webcomicsnation.com/jacen/monstar) is a space opera with photographic backgrounds, bad puns and snarky characters. *Life in Heck* (<www.lifeinheck.com>) is a series of loosely connected surrealist strips by an anonymous author.

Harry the Dog by David Follett (<www.davidfollett.com>) is a joke-a-day strip drawn in a retro style. *Riverside* by Rhys McDonald (<www.the-plastic-age.com>) is a slow-moving, beautifully drawn fantasy. *Clutching at Straws* by Paul Spencer (<www.paul.guardiancomics.com>) moves smoothly from surrealism to the mundane. *Recombinant Records* by Stuart McMillen (<www.recombinantrecords.net>) uses all the resources of line art to get a personal and sometimes political message across. And there are many, many more. So if you're still stuck on *Bristow* in the *SMH*, maybe it's time you took a look around.

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CATCHING SOME ZS: ONLINE COLLABORATION TOOLS

Jon Jermey

Writing collaborations can involve any number of authors from two to ten thousand, and an online component can range from emailing documents back and forth up to establishing sophisticated project-management websites. Here are some tools to make collaboration a little easier.

Cloud storage: Zumodrive and friends. Zumodrive (www.zumodrive.com) is one of many applications that allow documents to be stored 'in the cloud' – i.e. on the Internet – quickly and easily. Install Zumodrive on your computer, supply a password and a username, and a new 'disk' will appear in your file manager. Any files saved to that disk are copied to the web while you work. When your collaborators set up Zumodrive on their computers with the same account details, they link to the same files. All users of that account see pop-up messages when new files are added or existing files are modified. Unlike some of its rivals, Zumodrive is free for basic accounts, simple, and user-friendly. It works on Windows, Macintosh and Linux systems.

Working online: Zoho and Google Docs. These sites store your original documents online and manage access to them – preventing the accidents which can occur when two people work on the same document at the same time. Both Zoho (www.zoho.com) and Google Docs (docs.google.com) support collaboration in online word processing, spreadsheets and presentations, so you can calculate royalties and plan your Booker acceptance speech together while you're writing the masterpiece. Having set up accounts on either site, collaborators can specify which documents are to be shared, and who with, so there's no risk of collaborator A stumbling on the tell-all biography that you're working on with collaborator B. Both sites allow you to restrict some users to read-only access, so you can invite editors or reviewers to preview your work. Zoho and Google Docs can both send backup copies to your PC, and both offer free basic accounts. Google Docs is slicker, but Zoho is a friendlier and more versatile, with many other services available.

Works in progress: the blog book. Using a blog for your joint project means formatting is easy, there is no limit on contributors, and you can get immediate feedback on the work in progress. Many free blog hosting sites exist; the best-known is probably WordPress (www.wordpress.com). Writers who want more control can set up and customise blogging software on their own websites. WordPress is available for this too, but other popular choices are the CMS (content management system) applications Joomla! (yes, it has an exclamation mark in the name) and Drupal.

Jon Jermey (jonjermey@optusnet.com.au) is a journalist and indexer. Read about his adventures with Linux at learnubuntu.com.au.

writers online

by Jon Jeremy

New writers, fresh ways to get published

Like many aspiring writers, I respond to the phrase 'first novel' with bitter amusement. First *published* novel, fair enough! But young or beginning writers can take heart; apprentice work no longer has to pile up in a drawer, unread and unloved. There are plenty of websites where it can be unleashed upon the world – and may even get an audience.

Blogging, of course, is wonderful training for writers. Successful bloggers quickly acquire discipline, and modern blogging packages like WordPress make it easy to establish a unique and appropriate look for one's work. Lexitu.com, for instance, created by a Victorian Year 12 student, represents blogging at its best – brief, literate and to the point. And for many young writers Facebook and MySpace have become *de facto* blogs where they can practice their writing skills.

More traditional works by young authors can be found at youngwritersonline.net, a subscription website. The site has some young-ish administrators and a set of guidelines, as well as affiliated MySpace and Facebook groups. There is a community forum for general discussion and a writing forum where authors can post their work – poems, screenplays, stories, novels, song lyrics, reports and even artwork and photography. There's a chat room, and even a collaborative thread where authors can work together. At this stage the site is attracting three or four new items a week, and most of those are read and critiqued by at least one other member, and sometimes many more. Popular items are given a star rating. Members generally seem to take their status and their obligations seriously – sometimes too seriously – and the quality of the writing is generally good, more so than the average fan-fiction site, for instance. Most of the writers are from the US but other countries including Australia are represented.

A more formal approach to learning – with adult supervision – is the Youth Online program (tinyurl.com/24chhhs), an initiative by the New England Writers' Centre. This offers ten interactive workshops, extending over about five weeks in August and September, run by luminaries like John Marsden and Cecilia Dart-Thornton. The audience is provided by schools in the New England area via classroom teleconferencing.

A forum for younger children (from 8 to 17) can be found at [Youthcentral – tinyurl.com/2dulmp](http://Youthcentral-tinyurl.com/2dulmp). Sponsored by the Victorian government, this site hosts a range of 'e-zines' where groups of younger people can post their work. Most of the content is visual, but there are short accompanying pieces for many of the contributions.

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writers online

by Jon Jeremy

On the net, and getting paid!

Every month I get a payment from an online publisher. Not a big payment, alas, but it's been arriving every month for nearly two years, so it adds up to a moderately satisfying sum. The work in question involved writing some brief articles for BrightHub, a web-based compendium of information.

BrightHub articles are placed on the web for free, on the assumption that they attract readers, who in turn attract advertisers, who are prepared to pay to advertise on the site. Some of that trickles down to the authors, who write more articles. and so it goes on.

The sums involved are small tens of dollars rather than hundreds but it's good steady writing practice, and popular articles can pay off for a surprisingly long period. Several other websites use the same methods, and for authors who work quickly, the average payment rate is probably as good as for any other form of non-fiction writing.

If you want to try it, the first step is to contact a legitimate web publisher. Ignore the ads that yell 'Make money fast!' and check out some sites like the ones listed below. The first three sites are worldwide publishers; they pay you directly, and they exercise editorial control over what goes on to the site.

You should read some of their content first to find out what they require from their authors. Then look for a link saying 'Join us' or 'Write for us'. You may be required to sit an (unpaid) writing test before being placed on their books. Be prepared to do a few rewrites while you learn their preferred style and format. And note that plagiarism even of your own work elsewhere is strictly forbidden.

BrightHub: www.brighthub.com

Ehow: www.ehow.com

Helium: www.helium.com

And some sites with different business models:

Hubpages: hubpages.com doesn't pay directly, but inserts Google affiliate ads in your articles and splits the revenue (if any) you get 60%, they get 40%.

Constant Content: www.constantcontent.com is not a publisher but a broker: they host your work and offer it to online publishers. You control what rights are available and how much you want for them, and Constant Content takes a 35% commission as a hosting fee.

Obviously, articles about popular topics and current events attract bigger audiences and make more money, but if you are an expert in a particular niche you may still find enough readers to make it profitable. Original pictures can be included, and some sites can also host audio podcasts and video tutorials.

So why not put your communications skills to work?

JON JERMEY (jon@webindexing.biz) is a journalist and indexer. His latest book: *Bitten by the Penguin: Linux for Windows Users* is available from www.lulu.com.

writers online

by Jon Jeremy

One ebook forum to rule them all

With the growth of interest in – and revenue from – ebooks which is currently occurring, it's hard for novices to know where to begin. How do you find out what you need to know about ebook formats, reading hardware, distributors, publishers, legal actions and contract options?

Luckily, the free TeleRead blog is around to answer your questions. Founded by David Rothman in 1992, TeleRead has been reporting the big issues in the e-publishing industry since almost before there was one. David himself is a tireless crusader for 'well-stocked national digital library systems' and left the blog in 2010 to explore other ways to achieve his goal, but his successors, Paul Biba and Chris Meadows, and their troop of contributors, keep the TeleRead pot boiling.

TeleRead rarely publishes original articles – though when it does they are always worth reading. But it collects and comments on material from across the electronic and traditional publishing industries, as well as related items. Right now, for instance, there are TeleRead posts up about: the copyright troll company Righthaven; Wattpad, 'the world's most popular ebook community'; the economics of ereaders; an article about royalties in The Bookseller; and a new searchable archive of eighteenth-century ebooks from the University of Michigan Library.

You can also sign up to complete a short survey, and download an 8-page White Paper on digital publishing. Everything on TeleRead is archived and searchable by date, by topic and by author, and related posts are linked under each current post, so you can track back through the history of an issue. Writers with an interest in understanding ebooks and how the industry works should keep an eye on TeleRead; the address is www.teleread.com.

Among other forums, the Yahoo ebook-community group has been around since 1999 as a more personal platform where people can thrash out questions and argue their cases. Traffic is fairly light, averaging one or two messages a day, but there are occasional fire-fights about contentious issues like copyright restrictions. All postings made since 1999 are searchable via the site, though there is no topic tagging. The major posters are knowledgeable and articulate, and now and again they get a scoop on TeleRead: groups.yahoo.com/group/ebook-community.

For a more personal take on the ebook scene from a writer and practitioner, try Liz Castro's blog, 'Pigs, Gourds and Wikis' (www.pigsgourdsandwikis.com). Liz spends a lot of time on technical details such as embedding fonts and reporting on conferences, and – unlike some others – she keeps her blog up to date.

JON JERMEY (jonjerme@gmail.com) is a writer and indexer. His own blog: 'The Other Linux Mint Blog' is at otherlinuxmintblog.wordpress.com.

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Google Earth

Most of us have seen old US TV 'specials' filmed in other countries, which feature every major tourist site, no matter how far apart they are. A US crime show filmed in Australia, for instance, might begin with a shootout at the Opera House, followed by a surfboat chase off Bondi Beach and a helicopter pursuit across the Blue Mountains. The villain gets captured on horseback at Uluru, and the hero is back in Sydney in time for dinner at Centrepoint Tower. But it's hard to imagine any screenwriter or novelist trying to get away with this in 2011. Audiences are more widely travelled these days; and they have access to Google Earth.

Google Earth (www.googleearth.com) is a free Google internet program which connects your PC to a planet-wide database of satellite images. Everywhere is included, and major cities and sites of interest are shown in detail. Google Earth connects up with Google Street View where this is available, so a user can touch down and take a visual stroll along the Via Veneto or the Eyre Highway. Tourist photographs and 3D panoramas are also linked, so a travel writer setting out her experiences of, say, Paris, can retrace her steps on a house-by-house (or restaurant-by-restaurant) basis.

The independent Google Lit Trip website (www.googlelittrips.org) collects and stores literary journeys for display on Google Earth. For instance, a user can download a Google Earth file for Mem Fox's *Possum Magic*, and track the protagonists' gastronomical tour of Australian capital cities. Classical scholars can follow the wanderings of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, or Aeneas in the *Aeneid* – although Google Earth's coverage doesn't yet extend to Hell. Google Lit Trip is currently dominated by US fiction, but anyone can join and submit details for their own favourite books, including those they have written.

Period fiction writers shouldn't feel left out. Google Earth includes many historical maps and reconstructions; Ancient Rome, for instance, has been re-created in loving detail. An archive system allows users to backtrack to earlier satellite photos, so writers with an interest in recent history can observe the changes in Central Sydney, for instance, between its earliest images in 2000 and the most recent ones from 2011. Even science fiction writers can benefit: Google Earth also allows users to turn their view upwards instead of downwards and navigate through the stars!

Google Earth is a work in progress, and new material is pouring into it from the community all the time. Your readers will be using it to check on you, so why not beat them to it?

JON JERMEY (jonjermey@gmail.com) is a writer and indexer. His own blog: 'The Other Linux Mint Blog' is at otherlinuxmintblog.wordpress.com.

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Tag: You're it

Next time you're browsing the Web, right-click on the page and select 'View Source' ('View Page Source' in Firefox). A new window will open where you can see the text from the page, plus many odd-looking commands, mostly enclosed in pointy brackets – the greater-than and less-than signs from the bottom row of the keyboard. These commands are tags.

Tags are where designers put the instructions that tells web browsers what to do with a web page. For instance, the `<p>` tag tells the browser to start a new paragraph. More complex tags control layout, formatting, and the inclusion of non-text materials such as pictures and video boxes. Where some formatting needs to be turned on, then turned off, like a phrase in italics, two tags are usually required – an opening tag and a closing tag.

When you visit a web page, the whole thing, tags and all, gets sent to your browser, line by line, and the browser displays the text and interprets the tags if it can. If everything works, the result is a nicely-laid-out, attractively formatted, meaningful web page. If it doesn't, you see an ugly mess.

E-book readers use a similar system. While web page tags are generally written in HTML – Hypertext Markup Language – the most common system for e-books is EPUB. This is a subset of a widely-used general purpose language called XML – eXtended Markup Language. XML allows designers to invent pretty much any tags they like; that's the easy part. The hard part is getting everyone else to agree to use those tags, and building software that can handle them. Most of that hard work has already been done for EPUB, and outside the Amazon Kindle corral nearly all e-book distributors are using it. Inside the Kindle corral a different system is used, but it is possible to convert books back and forth between the two.

What does this mean for authors? As an author, you don't have to know the details of how tags work, because your (or your publisher's) book conversion software will take care of that for you. But the more you know, the quicker and easier it is going to be for you to anticipate problems that may arise, and to track them down and fix them when they do. You will be a happier and more confident creative person.

You can find a tutorial on EPUB tagging in the form of an eBook here: <http://tinyurl.com/44q6www>. To learn more about EPUB or XML, Wikipedia is a good place to start: <http://en.wikipedia.org>. Happy tagging!

Jon Jermey (jonjermey@gmail.com) is a writer, computer skills trainer, website designer, indexer and e-book consultant.

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writers online

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Free speech and free software

What if Strasbourg had patent laws in 1440? And a goldsmith called Johannes Gutenberg took out a patent on his device for reproducing marks on paper, with all its accompanying technology? By now Gutenberg Inc might be sitting on a corporate fortune bigger than Google's – but would we be any better off? Would we have hundreds of books in our free public libraries, or dozens, or none?

Our modern world is close to this scenario. Personal computing is dominated by patent-driven software monopolies that not only transfer money from the have-nots to the haves, but also provide ways for powerful forces to monitor behaviour and stifle dissent. Microsoft Windows, for instance, plays a critical role in the vast majority of all personal computers, most of them connected to the Internet, yet the exact content of the Windows code is a trade secret. It's a black box on everybody's desk; nobody but Microsoft knows what goes in or what comes out. Could they use that power, under financial or political pressure, to track, eavesdrop on or disrupt our computing activities? And if they did, who would ever know?

If the thought of being at the mercy of Microsoft or Apple and their self-serving policies gives you pause, then you may be a candidate for exploring the range of FOSS – free and open source software. FOSS campaigns urge programmers to develop software which is legally unrestricted and open to public scrutiny, and FOSS groups endeavour to make this available to everyone, regardless of their location, prosperity or political stance. Its greatest success has been the numerous operating systems based on the Linux kernel, widely used for years behind the scenes in commercial hosting sites, but now making their way on to desktop computer systems – mine, for instance. Many Linux versions provide a complete bundle of standard home and office software, free of charge and free of legal restrictions on its use or distribution.

Meanwhile, even diehard Windows users can avoid complete reliance on Microsoft by adopting a FOSS application like LibreOffice for word processing and spreadsheets. There are FOSS alternatives for web browsers, referencing programs like EndNote, PDF viewers and many other applications.

As usual, the best place to start learning about FOSS is Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_and_open_source_software. The Free Software Foundation is a worldwide lobby group; you can find a summary of their aims at www.fsf.org/about. And for those who want to take the plunge and replace Microsoft software altogether, an objective overview of the many varieties of Linux can be found at Distrowatch – www.distrowatch.com.

Jon Jermey (jonjermey@gmail.com) is a writer, computer skills trainer, website designer, indexer and eBook consultant.

writers online

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Better working practices

When work is slow it's a good time to review your working practices and squeeze out a little more productivity. Here are some software tips that could save you hours:

Word processing:

- Set up templates for the document types that you produce most often. They can include text like bylines, dates and page numbers as well as formats and styles.
- If you work in a discipline with specialised terminology, then buy, download or create customised dictionaries for spell-checking. It's a lot easier to add all the terms you need to a dictionary at once than in dribs and drabs as you come to them. Fiction writers can create dictionaries for their characters' names and locations.
- The Autocomplete and Autocorrect features help you dash off those long words and avoid your most common idiosyncratic mistakes. Ensure they're turned on and working properly.

Email:

- Do you manually sign each email and add your contact details? Setting up a signature block makes this a one-time operation.
- Many users still don't take advantage of the option to create folders and subfolders for email of different types or from different sources. I include the month in my subfolder names – '1208 – Australian Author' – and archive or delete them after a year. Rules can be set up to move incoming mail straight to the correct folder.
- Blocks of boilerplate text can be added to an email with the press of a button via an extension like QuickText for Thunderbird. Other email extensions include colour-coded folder management systems and sophisticated junk mail stoppers.

Financial and record-keeping:

- Most financial management programs are too complex for sole traders. A good simple invoicing program like Busy Bee (multiplatform) or Instant Invoice (Windows) can save a lot of time and trouble.
- You can track standard projects with GCStar Collections Manager (free, multiplatform). Although it's designed for collections of music, books or coins, it's easy to configure it to store the details of your short stories, articles or competition submissions. Tellico is a similar product, also free.

Academic citations:

- Zotero is a free browser extension that links your word processor and your browser. Install Zotero, browse to the website you want to reference, and press a button to add it to your database. Press another button in your word processor, and a properly formed citation is added to your document as a footnote or endnote.

General:

- Backup, backup, backup! Dropbox is a popular and convenient multiplatform backup system, free for up to 2GB of files.

Jon Jermey (jonjermey@gmail.com) is a writer, computer skills trainer, website designer, indexer and e-book consultant.

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Screw the rules!

Never heard of TV Tropes (<http://tvtropes.org>)? My teenage daughter is a big fan. And a site which describes itself as a 'catalog of the tricks of the trade for writing fiction' should be on every writer's bookmark list.

TV Tropes is the work of a group of genre-savvy volunteers who have assembled a Wiki – an online encyclopaedia – listing the plot devices, character stereotypes and standardised locations out of which most popular fiction is built. Although most of its references are to movies and TV shows, you will find written work there too. Charles Dickens and Jane Austen each have their own page, and the Australian Literature section mentions Graeme Base, Isobelle Carmody and Greg Egan amongst others.

What's it about? The best way to give you a taste is to quote some of the entries...

Phlebotinum: a versatile substance that may be rubbed on almost anything to cause an effect needed by a plot. Some examples: nanotechnology, magic crystal emanations, pixie dust, a sonic screwdriver, or even just some Green Rocks. In essence, it is the stuff that makes the plot go.

Sound familiar? How about

Day Of The Jackboot: when Those Wacky Nazis, Dirty Communists or people who look and act suspiciously like either of them take over the protagonist's country or hometown.

No Australian writer would ever use that tired old trope, I hope. But maybe this one?

Screw the Rules, I'm Beautiful! where a beautiful / handsome character gets away with morally ambiguous things...

Or this?

Bad Omen Anecdote: when, in the middle of some ... life-or-death situation, one character will remark to the other: "You know, this reminds me of a similar story...". The other character, hopeful, will remark "Oh, and and they succeeded?". And of course, the first character says "No, they all died..."

Or this?

Breaking the fourth wall: when a character acknowledges their fictionality, by either indirectly or directly addressing the audience.

It's not hard to come up with a few hackneyed items like this on your own, but to identify hundreds of them, give them all appropriate names and assemble them into a comprehensive, cross-linked collection, with examples of each from a range of different genres – including Real Life – is a major achievement.

TV Tropes is fun to read for its own sake. If you think you've spotted something they don't have, then join up and submit it. But if the website starts to read like one of your own novels or screenplays, then it's probably time to plan a rewrite.

Unless your name is Charles Dickens or Jane Austen.

Jon Jermey (jonjermey@gmail.com) is a writer, indexer, website designer and eBook consultant.

writers online

by Jon Jermey

ISBN in not a four-letter word*

In the Internet age, when anything can go online, it's hard to tell where writing stops and publishing starts. But for a publisher – or self-publisher – to be taken seriously, they still need the magic ticket which provides a seat at the marketing table. This is the ISBN – International Standard Book Number.

With ISBNs, books can find their way into catalogues, marketing websites and book shows: without them the best they are likely to attain is the bottom shelf at a local newsagent's. What is this powerful cantrip, and how does it achieve its potency?

The story begins in the Sixties with the British bookseller WH Smith, who called in a statistician, Gordon Foster, to help them keep track of their stock. Foster devised a nine-digit ID which was widely adopted in the UK.

A tenth digit was added when coverage was extended to books in other languages, and this became the worldwide ISBN system until 2007, when three digits were added at the beginning. The format and use of ISBNs is now controlled by the International Standards Organisation.

Here's a 13-digit ISBN – 978-0-7295-3910-4 – broken down into its parts:

978 – The industry code, drawn from the international GS1 system: '978' means 'Publishing'.

0 – The language group, in this case English. Can be up to five digits.

7295 – The publisher, or imprint. Larger publishers get fewer digits, smaller ones get more, up to a maximum of seven. Some identifying details can be found on the web. '7295' is allocated to Holt, Rinehart and Winston, though the book cover says 'Elsevier'. Blame takeovers.

3910 – A unique book number. Decisions on how to issue these are left to individual publishers. Small publishers get fewer digits, large publishers get more. The group + publisher + book number code always has nine digits in total.

4 – A check digit to verify the ISBN has been entered correctly.

Until recently getting hold of an ISBN required you to apply to the National Library, but it's now been deregulated, and all you need is cash. Australian ISBNs are currently issued by the library services firm Thorpe-Bowker, at prices starting from \$40 for one ISBN up to \$2750 for a thousand, plus a one-time publisher registration fee of \$55.

As self-publishing costs go, it's relatively minor, and worth having. Then you can send your book off to fight it out, weight for weight, at Amazon, Lulu, Angus & Robertson or the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Jon Jermey (jonjermey@gmail.com) is a writer, computer skills trainer, website designer, indexer and eBook consultant.

*Well, it is, but you know what I mean.