

Finding Free Books Online

Author's note: Between the writing and the publication of this column, a federal judge threw out the proposed Google settlement; the future of Google Books is now more uncertain than before.

Google's book digitization project, called **Google Books**, was first announced in 2004. Many publishers considered it to herald the end of the world and promptly went into extended litigation. Today, some experts feel that if the draft agreement is ever completely approved (now more than a year in the waiting), it will be too late to be useful for either Google or book publishers. Google continues to forge ahead, as do a few other projects, as well—often using Google's own information.

Some book digitization projects have long been available; **Project Gutenberg** (<http://www.gutenberg.org>), for example, has been slowly churning away at transcribing thousands of titles since 1971. But Google, as usual, has completely upended that process, digitizing thousands of books per day. Yes, Google Books is not free from mistakes: a page (or an entire book) might appear upside down; text might be too blurry to read; bibliographic data can range from simply confusing to downright wrong; and more. But overall, it makes an enormous amount of monographic information instantly available to anyone with internet access.

Google Books is the best known, because their content often appears in standard Google searches. But Google's strengths are in finding needles in enormous haystacks, not in effectively organizing either the needles or the hay bales. Which explains why I find *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* and *Sheep in a Jeep* among the first five listings in the "Technology & Engineering" section. Conducting searches can be difficult because the pile of information is just so huge. But it does also work much of the time: a search for "early submarine history" returned the opening pages to Paul Fontenoy's 2007 book *Submarines: An Illustrated History of their Impact*, which were certainly relevant. Google Books displayed up through page 18; "Pages 19 to 448 are not shown in this preview," the site explains. You can, however, buy an ebook of this title via Google—in this example, it'll cost you \$68, while Amazon offers new and used copies (from other sellers) starting at about \$25, but not a Kindle edition.

Google Books offers several levels of viewing: for books not in copyright, one can usually read the entire work. For books in

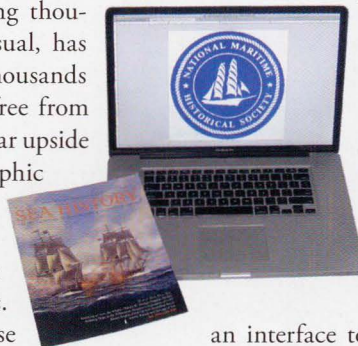
copyright, the amount one can view depends on publisher-set limitations. In some cases, one can see quite a bit; in others, one can only see a "snippet." Finally, some books have absolutely no text available at all. The most problematic appear to be those published 20–40 years ago: they're not out of copyright, but they don't have an identified copyright holder who would allow more content to be displayed.

Hathi Trust (<http://hathitrust.org> "hathi" is Hindi for "elephant") is another major online collection of ebooks, and they take a much more enlightened—and nuanced—view of bibliographic data. For example, Hathi Trust offers a "catalog search" box (for looking *for* books) and a "full-text search" box (for looking *in* books). Working with the library service OCLC (Online Computer Library Center, Inc.), they've created a proper online catalog for the 8.2 million volumes in their collection. Hathi Trust pulls content from many sources, including Google, though they have fewer books overall.

OpenLibrary (<http://openlibrary.org>) is an interface to books available through the **Internet Archive** (<http://archive.org>); their concept is "one webpage for every book," with online versions of as many of those as possible. **Open Library** offers links to help people find physical and electronic versions of many of its books, and if you have an account then you can—sort of—"borrow" some of the books.

Many other projects exist, some in other languages. Most major national libraries have book digitization projects, such as France's **Gallica** (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/?&lang=EN> for the English language site); **Europeana** (<http://europeana.eu/portal/>); and **Project Runeberg** (<http://runeberg.org/>), for classic Nordic literature. An extensive list of other projects appears in **Wikipedia** at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_digital_library_projects.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at peter@shipindex.org. See <http://www.shipindex.org> for a free compilation of over 140,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓

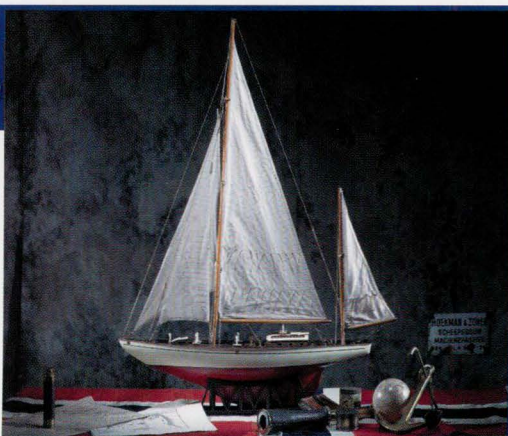


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