

ESSAY

## Where to Find Digital Lit

by David Orr

The World Wide Web is a glorious collection of the best that has been thought and said, especially if it involves Free Mortgage Advice 4 U! or sexual positions that approach the purely theoretical. In addition, however, the Web is home to hundreds of sites that talk about, pick on, poke at and generally mull over books, writers and writing. It would be impossible to list, much less describe, all of these destinations, but the following guide should provide you with an introduction to literary life on the Web; where you go from here is your own business. The sites of print publications (like The New York Times Book Review) have been excluded to allow more space for pure creatures of the Internet.

**Beatrice** <[www.beatrice.com](http://www.beatrice.com)> The best lit bloggers are keen and devoted readers, witty gossips and perceptive critics of the book industry. The worst lit bloggers sound like what you'd get if you seated the title characters from "Heathers" around the Algonquin Round Table and gave them a photo of Zadie Smith on a bad hair day. Ron Hogan, who runs Beatrice, stays on the right side of that line. Beatrice delivers daily literary news with an even tone and an open mind; the site also includes interviews Hogan has conducted with authors like the science fiction ace Bruce Sterling. Like most Web-based interviewers, Hogan prefers to keep things loose; in his conversation with Sterling, for example, he puts his tongue firmly in his cheek and asks the question that, let's face it, we'd all like to hear answered: "How scientifically feasible is your bad guy's secret weapon, anyway?"

**Bookslut** <[www.bookslut.com](http://www.bookslut.com)> Although it sounds like an adult personals service for fans of "Madame Bovary," Bookslut is actually a friendly literary hub that aims to provide "insightful reviews, commentary on trends, updated news, and a lot of silliness." The editor of Bookslut, Jessa Crispin, is one of the best-known and most devoted lit bloggers; she's also the author of such valuable "Slutlessons" as "How to Talk Like You've Read Something You Haven't" and "How to Throw a Bloomsday Party," two subjects that presumably are not related. The taste here runs slightly more to Chris Ware and Chuck Palahniuk than Geoffrey Hill and W. G. Sebald, but the site makes a worthy effort to accommodate all visitors. That's what a good Bookslut does, you know.

**The Complete Review** <[www.complete-review.com](http://www.complete-review.com)> The Complete Review (or CR) offers more than 1,200 original reviews of high-quality titles in several genres, as well as links to reviews from other sources, from The Economist and Entertainment Weekly to the Swiss newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung. The CR doesn't just review a book, though; it assigns that book a grade—and not just its own grade, but the grades that (in The CR's opinion) the book's other reviewers would have given, had they been using an A through F scale. So Martin Amis's "Night Train," for example, gets a B- from The Complete Review, a C from The Boston Globe, and a B+ from Time. (How accurate is the grading? Probably about an A-.) The anonymous site owners also write an appealingly cranky blog that is notable for its erudition, its passionate advocacy of literature in translation and its passive-aggressive wooing of the comely young author Nell Freudenberger. Though The Complete Review sometimes seems never to read a book without perusing a work, it remains one of the best literary destinations on the Web.

**Cosmoetica** <[www.cosmoetica.com](http://www.cosmoetica.com)> As a poet, Dan Schneider is, by his own humble admission, “better than Walt Whitman.” In between writing the poems that will make him immortal, however—and he’s apparently got more than 10,000 of them—Schneider has found time to offer a few helpful criticisms regarding his fellow poets and reviewers. If you were looking for someone willing to call T. S. Eliot “1 of the most grossly overrated writers in the history of the world, & the English language,” Schneider is your man. His site includes similarly jolly commentary on a large number of contemporary writers.

**Everyone Who’s Anyone in Adult Trade Publishing** <[www.everyonewhosanyone.com](http://www.everyonewhosanyone.com)> One of the great treasures of the Web, this site is a listing of every agent and publisher the writer Gerard Jones contacted in his quest to get his various manuscripts published—in other words, everyone who’s anyone. Jones has reproduced many of his e-mail exchanges with his targets verbatim, which in some cases makes the publishing community look like decent, sensitive people doing the best work they can in a difficult field (here’s to you, Daniel Menaker!). Other times, not so much. Either way, the site will tell you more about the book world than any five “How-to-Publish” treatises combined.

**FanFiction.Net** <[www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)> You probably finished “Pride and Prejudice” thinking, “That was fine, but I’d have liked at least one hot encounter between Darcy and Wickham, especially if it involved exposed chests and a healthy slathering of cheap cologne.” Reader, they’ve written it. Fan fiction (“fanfic” to its practitioners) is short fiction—or less frequently, poetry, plays or novellas—based on TV shows, movies, and, of course, contemporary and classic literature. Fanfic uses the source’s pre-existing characters, tends to be raunchy, and has a lingo that can be as bewildering as it is fascinating (a “plot bunny,” for example, is a fanfic story idea). There are several fanfic archives on the Web, but FanFiction.Net is one of the few that include a ratings guide. Moreover, the site’s header invites you to “unleash your imagination and free your soul,” which sounds like a good idea, so long as your soul isn’t horrified into immobility by the site’s inclusion of 42 fan fiction stories based on “The Diary of Anne Frank.”

**Foetry** <[www.foetry.com](http://www.foetry.com)> In addition to being the unacknowledged legislators of the world, poets are a bunch of kiss-ups who scramble around for prizes and teaching gigs like piglets after apple cores. Or such, at any rate, is the premise of Foetry, a Web site devoted to “exposing the fraudulent ‘contests.’ Tracking the sycophants. Naming names.” Although the site’s blustery tone can be off-putting, Foetry has helped focus attention on a serious issue confronting the poetry world—as the number of poets has increased, and with many of those writers spending upward of \$25,000 to acquire an M.F.A., the institutions intended to help preserve and develop American poetry sometimes operate as if the art were an 18th-century guild, complete with secret handshakes. Can the poetry world become more transparent? If so, would it make contemporary writing more interesting? And regardless, will the people behind Foetry get their pants sued off? It’s anyone’s guess, but in the meantime, the mud is flying in the Foetry discussion forums.

**Godawful Fan Fiction** <[www.godawful.net](http://www.godawful.net)> When you have had your fill of slash, gen and ‘ship fiction (fanfic terms for various character entanglements), when you groan at the arrival of each new “Mary Sue” (a ludicrously empowered author proxy), when you find yourself wishing every story you read had been beta-ed (i.e. edited), then it’s time to visit Godawful Fan Fiction, where the worst fan fiction on the Web is filleted with the hot knife of peer criticism. The Darcy/Wickham encounter mentioned above under FanFiction.Net is just one of many scenarios to have been deboned in the gleefully malicious Godawful forums.

**Identity Theory** <[www.identitytheory.com](http://www.identitytheory.com)> Identity Theory includes reviews and a Web log, but its real attractions are Martin Amis, Anthony Lane, Ben Katchor, Andrea Barrett, Christopher Hitchens, Donna Tartt and Thisbe Nissen—or any of the other 150 or so writers and illustrators whose interviews with the journalist Robert Birnbaum are posted on the site. Birnbaum’s interviews are more like off-the-cuff chats, and his calculated informality often elicits responses that are as candid as they are amusing. Here, for example, is Jane Smiley on her hope that older books will remain on bookstore shelves as long as possible: “I am taking a medievalist’s view. That’s what I studied in graduate school. And when you are a medievalist you don’t study what’s good, you study what’s left. And you try to find good things in it.” Even better, though, is Chip Kidd’s response when Birnbaum suggests that Kidd has become a celebrity: “That’s nonsense. I’d love it if they asked me to be a judge on ‘Law & Order.’”

**The Literary Dick** <[www.jonathanames.com/blog/literary\\_blog.html](http://www.jonathanames.com/blog/literary_blog.html)> That’s “dick” as in “Private Detective.” The Literary Dick is an offshoot of the writer Jonathan Ames’s personal site, in which Ames and a writer named Michael Wood (no, not that Michael Wood) attempt to answer questions about various literary mysteries posted by readers. Ever wanted to know why Edmund Wilson was called “Bunny”? Curious about Henry James’s testicle injury? Seek here and ye shall find.

**The London News Review—Books Diary** <<http://www.lnreview.co.uk/books/diary/>> : Easily the funniest of the lit blogs, Books Diary speaks not softly to the objects of its scorn. When the poet and critic Tom Paulin suggested in a recent essay that Wordsworth’s use of the word “mountain” was actually intended as a reference to the Jacobins (“la montagne” being the name for the highest benches in the French National Assembly), Books Diary responded with typical restraint: “This is so eccentric, so semi-demi-hemi-rational, that there’s really only one way to argue. . . . ‘Stop saying weird, dull stuff. And get a prose style.’” The ashes of Tom Paulin’s critical corpus will be scattered over the Atlantic by Aer Lingus this Thursday. Tough as it was on Paulin, though, nothing can compare to the opening line of Books Diary’s recent post on Plum Sykes’s novel “Bergdorf Blondes”: “This is the most fascinatingly bad book since ‘Swan’ by Naomi Campbell.”

**Maud Newton** <[www.maudnewton.com](http://www.maudnewton.com)> Maud Newton is a New York writer and former lawyer whose blog is one of the Web’s best sources for publishing industry news and general literary chatter. Newton has recently begun running interviews with authors and editors; her encounter with (or should that be “cross-examination of”?) Brigid Hughes, the new editor of *The Paris Review*, is the kind of conversation that should happen more often in the book world. Though she occasionally indulges in the chronic vice of the blogs—has she mentioned her fellow bloggers? And how clever they are? And how much she really, really likes them?—Newton is usually a reliable guide and a fair-minded reader. Her site’s well worth a daily visit.

**MobyLives** <[www.mobylikes.com](http://www.mobylikes.com)> Once one of the Web’s literary fixtures, MobyLives is currently on hiatus. Nonetheless, the proprietor, Dennis Loy Johnson, deserves to be mentioned here for his famously anti-establishment blog postings (this newspaper’s books coverage came under regular fire), his focus on the good work that gets lost in the publishing shuffle and his intriguing guest column series. The MobyLives archive is still active, and includes articles on everything from the effect of the Patriot Act on libraries to the rationale behind the sexy author photos in *The New Yorker*’s debut fiction issue. Dissatisfied with heckling the book world from the back row, Johnson became a publisher himself in 2002, and has handled books by, among others, Bernard-Henri Levy and the notorious *Atlantic Monthly* polemicist B. R. Myers.

**Poetry Daily** <[www.poetrydaily.org](http://www.poetrydaily.org)> Every day, Poetry Daily posts a poem by a contemporary poet, which means that if all American poets were to hock their laptops tomorrow, Poetry Daily could only continue for another fifteen or twenty thousand years. (Yes, there are a lot of poets, and yes, they write a lot of poems.) Perhaps the best thing about Poetry Daily, though—aside from the occasional terrific piece of writing—is its archive, which catalogs poetry news from around the world daily.

**Publishers Lunch** <[www.publishersmarketplace.com](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com)> Publishers Lunch is an e-mail service that provides daily updates on the nuts and bolts of the book world. Subscription for the basic daily e-mail message is free, and messages usually offer salty takes on current literary news (“Prof Finds That Best Sellers, Um, Sell Well”), a link to job postings, compilations of best-seller lists and news about book deals. In its deal listings, Publishers Lunch avoids exact dollar amounts in favor of fig-leaf adjectives like “nice” (i.e., \$1 to \$100,000) and “major” (\$501,000 and up), none of which will prevent most readers from figuring out which writers can afford to buy them drinks.

**The Underground Literary Alliance** <[www.literaryrevolution.com/](http://www.literaryrevolution.com/)> Karl Marx once said, “Of all the great inequities of capitalism, perhaps none is so heartbreaking as the slush pile at Random House.” Fortunately, the Underground Literary Alliance is here to change all that. Led by an impresario who goes by the name King Wenclas (like the Christmas song, only burlier), the rough-and-tumble populists of the U.L.A. are determined to shatter the snotty New York publishing scene and bring good ol’ two-fisted, hard-working, not-terribly-well-written fiction back to the masses. Accordingly, they have caused ruckuses at readings, fired out screeds with titles like “The Art Revolution vs. Corporate Art” and gotten into shoving matches with the writer Thomas Beller (the “moody giant,” in Wenclas’s poetic description of the fracas). Do you hear the people sing? Singing the song of angry men?

**Web del Sol** <[www.webdelsol.com](http://www.webdelsol.com)> Granted, the Web del Sol site is so confusing that it sometimes seems to have been designed by monkeys flinging paint. If you’re willing to spend the time, though, you won’t regret it; Web del Sol is a sprawling Internet hybrid that acts as a portal to many different literary magazines (Painted Bride Quarterly and Southwest Review among them), and also contains assorted interactive features, various hypermedia gewgaws, a kitchen sink, several book columns, another kitchen sink, a large amount of original writing and the lost treasure of the Knights Templar. The general aesthetic here is “the more the merrier”; though the site hosts No: A Journal of the Arts, which specializes in experimental writing, it also promotes the poetry critic Joan Houlihan, who absolutely loathes the stuff. The site’s founder and editor, Michael Neff, holds these disparate elements together with enthusiastic good will.

**Words Without Borders** <[www.wordswithoutborders.org/](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/)> Everyone hates a do-gooder, especially when he speaks Norwegian. Still, it’s impossible not to admire the intelligence and idealism of Words Without Borders, a site devoted to the translation of foreign writing into English. As the site administrators point out, half of all the books in translation are translated from English, but only 6 percent are translated into English—an extraordinary imbalance that can’t help affecting the way people in different parts of the world view each other. A recent issue, focused on religious literature, included Abbas Saffari’s wry Adam-and-Eve poem “Our Story” as well as Adolfo Albertazzi’s tale about a demonic spirit that resists all attempts to banish it, only to be overcome by a German professor’s stunningly boring lecture on demonology.