Literary treasures, kid-friendly format

With design help from youngest bibliophiles, local group putting trove of children's books online

It is barely bigger than a matchbook. Its tiny spine is hand-sewn with string. Published in the mid-1800s, its eight pages are softly tattered and dappled brown with age.

Until recently, the only way to see this miniature illustrated children's book at the Boston Public Library was to visit the rare books department, accompanied by a librarian, and view it in a private reading room.

But now, "Gems for Children," which extols the joy of school and virtue of doing right, is available to anyone with a computer and Internet connection. With a mouse click, it can be read - page by page, picture by picture - in the International Children's Digital Library, a website aiming to become the world's largest collection of online children's literature.

Run by a local nonprofit, the electronic database contains thousands of digitized historic and contemporary children's books in dozens of languages, from Chinese to Croatian, including rare and fragile works that have been largely hidden from public view. The free site was created not only to fight illiteracy, but to teach tolerance by introducing children to reading material from other cultures and to save books at risk of perishing from lack of space and care.

Most important, it is easy-to-use. Rich with simple graphics and primary colors, the kid-friendly website enables visitors to search for, say, books with red or yellow covers, or fairy tales, or stories about imaginary creatures, or books with chapters and pictures.

Designed using feedback from children, the site recognizes that young readers rarely search for books the way adults do, such as by title or author. As a result,
it lets children choose books by age level (from 3 to 13) or length ("short," "medium," or "long"), or tales that are happy or sad, or stories that include poems and rhymes. They can also select not simply animal books, but books specifically about ducks, or bears, or magic dogs.

"Kids often go to the library and say, 'I had a book out on dinosaurs and it was blue and now I can't find it,' so if they're interested in dinosaurs, this lets them search for dinosaurs, or it lets them search for the color of the cover," said Terri Goldich, a curator at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut.

The Dodd center, a special collections archive, has digitized numerous books for inclusion in the International Children's Digital Library, including the first British edition and first American edition of the 1877 children's classic "Black Beauty."

"It's an absolutely wonderful interface," Goldich said.

The website, which lets children choose passwords guarded by monsters, is also making literary treasure troves widely available to the public for the first time. The BPL, for example, is sharing a grant with the digital library to post online a portion of its Alice M. Jordan Collection, a 160,000-volume storehouse of children's literature that is not available for general circulation.

"It's our goal as a library to put our collections in the hands of all our users, and one of the most effective ways we can do that is to digitize them and put them online, where there are no restrictions of time or space," said Maura Marx, the BPL's digital services manager.

"If you walk into any of our branches and look at the computers in the children's area, they're packed, because that's how kids are learning," she added. "So we have to supply them with worthy content so their imaginations will be fired and they won't just be surfing around online - and this is an amazing tool, because anyone with the Internet can have access to it."

Because the website's collection is available in multiple languages, it can be used worldwide - including in obscure places where, paradoxically, an Internet connection can be more common than a public library, thanks to organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that are working to spread technology. In a partnership with the World Bank, for example, the digital library recently created its first "branch library" in Mongolia by digitizing more than 250 Mongolian children's books and installing a computer server in Ulaanbaatar, the country's capital.

The website has appeal to large urban US school systems, whose student populations speak dozens of languages. It also provides a solution for parents who may not have time to take their children to a library, or for parents whose first language is not English and who want their children to read books published in their native tongue.

"This provides a way for us to reach many, many more children, teachers, and parents," said Tim Browne, executive director of the International Children's Digital Library Foundation, the Manchester nonprofit that operates the site in collaboration with the University of Maryland. "In very remote villages, we can for the first time expose children and educational systems to real, educational books."

The nonprofit relies heavily on volunteers to identify worthy books to add to its collection, secure copyright permission if necessary, and send the books to the foundation physically or digitally. Books are digitized by scanning them page by page, a process the library sometimes outsources to places like the Internet Archive.

For now, reading books online lacks the coziness of curling up with a good
book in a soft chair. But as digital reading devices such as the Sony Reader and Amazon Kindle become more widespread, online book-reading may move into the mainstream.

"Snuggling up in bed with a computer screen is not the same thing as reading a story to your kids when you're tucking them in, but kids really respond to this kind of technology in a different way," Goldich said. "This is putting literature in the hands of children everywhere in the world - and I hate to sound trite, but I think that brings us all closer."

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