



LIBRARY THING A PERFECT PROGRAMME FOR YOUR ASTRONOMICAL LIBRARY

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caslib@LibraryThing

For the last year, the Canterbury Astronomical Society (CAS) has been cataloguing its library holdings using a remarkable web site called LibraryThing (www.librarything.com). LibraryThing (LT) is primarily designed for book lovers seeking to catalogue their own personal collection, and is ideally suited for this task. However, it has also been discovered by small clubs and societies, who are finding it an easy and practical way of maintaining an online catalogue.

The need for a readily accessible online catalogue became evident during a large scale reorganisation of CAS's West Melton Observatory which has taken place over the last year. My role in this exercise was to overhaul the library, which – although it had originally been well organised and well maintained – had gradually succumbed to the second law of thermodynamics to the point where most members had no idea what the library actually held, and would have had difficulty finding it even if they did. So what we wanted was some form of electronic catalogue which could be easily made available to members, and which would be browsable by title, author, keyword etc.

LT turned out to be more or less exactly what we needed. It is very user-friendly and easy to navigate, although – like most sites these days – really needs a broadband connection. A quick “how to” guide is given below, using the CAS library as an example. Use of the site is free for holdings of up to 200 books, after which individuals can choose to pay either US\$10 per year or US\$25 for life. Institutional memberships (for organisations such as CAS) cost US\$25 per year. By far the best way to get the feel of the site is just to get in there and browse, using the online tutorials as a starting point.

From the perspective of the New Zealand astronomical community, one of LT's most useful features is Groups function, which allows groups of users who share a common interest to easily browse each other's libraries. Anyone can set up a Group, and there are already several relating to astronomy and astrophysics: go to the Groups page and search for “astronomy” to find them. The main group is “Astronomy and astrophysics”, but I have also set up a “New Zealand astronomy” group to encourage other New Zealand astronomers and societies to get involved. My hope is that this could eventually build into a shared resource to facilitate exchanges between libraries – about 10% of caslib's collection is duplicated, as I discovered in the process of setting up the library – and possibly some form of inter-loan facility as well. LT also allows users to post reviews of books, and these tend to be much more constructive than their equivalents on sites such as Amazon.com.

Creating a new library and entering books is easy, particularly for items recent enough to have an ISBN or Library of Congress number. All you need to do is enter this number, and LT consults any one of nearly 700 online catalogues around the world to download details such as author, title, year of publication, and Dewey decimal number. Even if your book predates such modern catalogue numbers, simply entering the title or author will often allow catalogues such as the British Library to locate it in one hit. Thereafter, the main effort involves assigning keywords, and possibly a Dewey number if one cannot be found online. For caslib, I also took the time to add a brief (2-3 sentence) description of the book so as to give members an idea of its content and level of difficulty.

Physically, caslib now occupies one wall of a much tidied-up Lodge, with all books carrying a shelf-mark on the spine indicating the Dewey number and author, and sorted in that order. The collection totals just over 500 volumes, mostly on astronomy but also covering subjects such as physics, space flight, telescope making, religion and mythology. LT's statistics page shows that the holdings are somewhat dated, with a median publication date in the 1960s, so one of the incidental benefits has been to highlight this relative antiquity and give guidance to CAS as to how the collection should be developed in the future.

All in all, I believe LT has the potential to be a powerful tool for New Zealand astronomical societies seeking to work more cooperatively. Check out the caslib page using the brief tutorial below, and feel free to browse my own library (www.librarything.com/catalog/unwinm) while you're about it. Jump in boots and all, and get in touch with me anytime if you have any queries.

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caslib@LibraryThing: a brief tutorial

Navigating to caslib (<http://www.librarything.com/catalog/caslib>) will display the following screen. Use the following mouse operations to navigate your way around the library:

The screenshot shows the LibraryThing website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Home', 'Search', 'Zeitgeist', 'Talk', 'Groups', 'About', and 'Blog'. Below that, the 'caslib > library' section is visible. The main content area displays a list of books with columns for Author, Date, Title, Tags, Comments, Dewey No., and Shared. Annotations 1 through 8 are placed on the page to highlight specific features and actions.

| Author | Date | Title | Tags | Comments | Dewey No. | Shared |
|-------------------------|------|---|--|---|-----------|--------|
| Lunary, Duncan | 1974 | Man and the stars : contact & communication with other intelligence | space flight, exobiology | Von Daniken-esque speculations on prospects for contact with, and travel to, civilisations elsewhere in the universe (hardback, 324 pages) | 001.50999 | 4 |
| Stoney, Jack | 1976 | CETI, communication with extra-terrestrial intelligence | SETI, alien contact, exobiology | Overview of the CETI (now SETI) programme for the general public, but somewhat oversensationalised (paperback, 249 pages) | 001.50999 | 4 |
| Hoyle, Fred | 1966 | Man in the universe | philosophy, civilisation | Philosophical speculations about the place of humans in the cosmos, based on the 1966 Bampton Lectures at Columbia University (hardback, 81 pages) | 100.8 | 2 |
| Denbigh, Kenneth George | 1975 | An inventive universe | philosophy, time, determinism | Abstruse philosophical discussion of free will and determinism, of interest as an early reference to the concept of "emergent properties" (hardback, 220 pages) | 115 | 2 |
| Andrews, Munya | 2004 | The seven sisters of the Pleiades : stories from around the world | astronomy, constellations, folklore, traditional knowledge | Legends and folklore associated with the star cluster known to the Greeks as the Pleiades (paperback, 368 pages) | 202.1222 | 5 |

1. LT holds much more information about each book than can conveniently be displayed in a single line. Toggle caslib's recommended style to display fields likely to be of most interest to CAS members. These include author, title, and year of publication; tags (or keywords); a brief comment on the content and level of difficulty; the Dewey Decimal number; and the number of other LT users who hold the same work.
2. Toggle between list view (as shown) and cover view (to display covers only).
3. Click here to move quickly through the library, in pages of 20 books.
4. Click on any column heading to sort by that column. A second click reverses the sort order.
5. Click on an author's name to display all works by that author which are known to LT. This will generally include works not held by caslib.
6. Click on a tag/keyword to display all caslib holdings sharing that keyword.
7. Click on the user icon to locate other LT users with the same holding. A yellow or green page icon here indicates the presence of a review posted by another user.
8. Search for caslib holdings by author, title, or keyword. Try looking for an author name such as "Hoyle" or "Shapley", or simply browse by keyword.