

Bookshare.org:
The Project for Creating Accessible Books through Computers

**An address to the General Session of the
National Federation of the Blind
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Introduction

Thank you, Dr. Mauer, for the honor of addressing this convention. I have been to at least twelve conventions and find it an honor to serve as a developer of adaptive technology over the last twelve years.

I'm here to tell you about Bookshare.org, a new library on the web for blind people with over 10,000 books currently available on line. Benetech is the new name of Arkenstone, the nonprofit I started in 1989 to bring improved access to books through scanning. Having more than 40,000 Arkenstone reading system users, I well understood that book scanning is both a significant benefit and a significant burden:

- It's a benefit because it makes the 95+% of print material that is not in alternate forms accessible
- It's a burden because it takes hours to scan a book

I know that if Arkenstone users had another option to obtain an accessible book, they would far rather have it than to have to scan the book personally.

It's said that fortune favors the prepared mind. Working with blind people and providing reading systems gave me an excellent appreciation of the massive challenge blind people continue to have in getting access to books and especially Braille.

That preparation stood me in good stead, two and a half years ago. My teenage son, Jimmy, had installed a new piece of software on our home computer, and I asked him to show it to me. He explained that Napster gave him access to music over the Internet. We spent a pleasant hour listening to music, with Jimmy

showing me his current favorites and with me finding songs from my youth to show him. As we were chatting, I noticed the hard drive was still very active. We quickly found out that we were serving up copies of the music we had downloaded to other people on the Internet. Oh, no! As a software maker, I realized that it probably wasn't legal and we took Napster off our PC.

Still, I kept thinking about how clever the peer-to-peer technology was: allowing people all over to help each other with information via the Internet. I wondered if the same kind of approach could help blind people with books access.

I did some research – and it turns out it was legal! A copyright law change was passed in 1996, known as the Chafee Amendment. This law change makes it possible for a nonprofit or government agency, to make just about any book available to blind people in disability specific formats. And lucky for us – the formats not only included Braille and audio, but also digital formats! As I did additional research, I also found that a consumer organization had played a big role in passing this law, and I think you all know which organization that was! Yes, it was the Federation.

This makes it possible for a new kind of library to be built on the Internet – a library where the collection is built by the readers themselves!

How does Bookshare.org work?

Think of it as amazon.com for the blind – you go to the website, type in the author or title keyword, get the list of matches and see information about the book, author, title, copyright date, quality (because our books are scanned they vary in quality) and an optional synopsis.

Anybody in the world can do this today!

The difference from Amazon is instant gratification: you can download the book in a minute or two. If the book is public domain – generally 80 years or older – anyone can download the book today in four formats. If it's copyrighted you have to be a member and have an access password. More about that later!

You download the book to your PC and read it there with your screen reader or use refreshable Braille. It works with all the leading software and devices designed for the blind. We have users who have created large eBook libraries on their PCs and many dedicated users carry several books for Bookshare.org around in their Braille notetakers.

Thanks to a new partnership with the Braille Institute, you'll also be able to order embossed Braille copies of the books in our collection over the web, for a cost that may surprise you in its affordability.

We believe that lowering the barriers to obtaining Braille books is a critically important part of Bookshare.org, whether it's electronic Braille or physical embossed Braille books.

Where do the books come from? They come from you!

The great majority are scanned by the blind community in America.

Most of our volunteers are visually impaired, but let me assure you that vision is no impediment to volunteering with Bookshare.org – we'll accept anyone who shares our passion for literacy and access! We know there are many dedicated family members, transcriptionists and teachers who have worked tirelessly for literacy.

Still, it is our users who determine the majority of our collection – and if a given book interested one blind person enough to scan it – we want it for the next person.

NFB is the blind speaking for the blind. Bookshare.org is the blind scanning for the blind!

To become a member, you need to do three things

First, qualify under the copyright law exemption as being visually impaired. If you qualify for the NLS Talking Book services, you should qualify for Bookshare.org. You must be a U.S resident. NLS has been extremely helpful and will confirm to us for NLS users that they qualify for Bookshare.org services.

Second, you must agree to our member agreement. The most important provision, one that was key to gaining the support of the publishing industry, was that electronic books would not be shared with other people except through Bookshare.org. The publishers want access to their books in electronic form to be carefully controlled – and it's a fair concern. It is critical that we uphold the social bargain and keep these books inside the disability community. It will hurt this community if Bookshare.org books become pirated books on the Internet.

The only exemption is Braille books in embossed form, which may be shared with anyone in the U.S. The publishers were quite reasonable about agreeing that physical Braille was unlikely to be abused!

Third, you need to pay a subscription fee. Although Benetech is a nonprofit, Bookshare.org is not government funded. We need to charge a subscription fee to pay for the small staff we have and for the website operations. We hope that the service will break even financially within two years and then be sustainable. By that point, we will have spent more than \$1 million on creating Bookshare.org and subsidizing its startup phase. The first year's subscription normally costs \$75, but for federationists at this convention we've dropped it one third to \$50. For people who cannot afford this, it is possible to volunteer and get the service for free.

Some people ask if we're replacing the existing sources of accessible books. My answer is not at all! Bookshare.org is a new and exciting alternative with its own advantages and drawbacks, and I want to make those clear to you now.

Bookshare.org is not providing professionally narrated audio books – our books are delivered only in synthetic speech or in Braille. If NLS Talking Books are solving your reading needs, that's great and you need not look at Bookshare.org.

Second, our quality levels are not the same as you would get from other providers – our books are scanned and often contain scanning errors. Although more than half of our collection is proofread, the rest are not. So, we expect to deliver scan quality books or better.

We are also not providing textbooks with the tables and graphs carefully explained as you might get from books from Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic. We don't have the resources to do what RFB&D does so well – so we're focusing on meeting unmet needs.

Now that I've told you what Bookshare is not, let me tell you what it is!

Bookshare.org is a library with more than 10,000 books that is growing by 100's of books monthly.

Bookshare.org is a place where the latest best sellers are available quickly after they hit the bookstore.

Bookshare.org is a place where no interest is too narrow, where two people anywhere in the country can share an interest via a book that no other service could afford to make available.

Bookshare.org is a place where teachers and transcriptionists can share high quality Braille files, ensuring that their hours of expert work will benefit as many students and professionals as possible.

Bookshare.org is a place where you can request a book and often see it available within a month.

That's just what Bookshare.org is today – when it is less than six months old. The future is bright!

Bookshare.org will be a place where soon you'll be able to order a Braille book for 8 cents a page if someone has already put that time and effort into making a Braille file that can be directly printed.

Bookshare.org will be a place where the quality of the collection will always be improving and the size of the collection will always be expanding.

Bookshare.org will be a place where students will find the full range of pleasure reading, recommended outside reading and literature enjoyed by their sighted friends.

If you want it to be so, Bookshare.org could become the world's largest collection of electronic books – an immense cultural legacy of the blind community to society over the long term.

If you want it to be so, Bookshare.org can be the place where you usually find the exact book you're looking for, and always find books you want to read.

Benetech can't build the Bookshare.org I'm dreaming of, but you can.

We are toolmakers at Benetech, and we measure our success not by what we do, but what our customers accomplish with the tools we build.

I say to you today – Find those scanned books languishing on your hard drives, find those Braille files waiting lonely at your school or transcriptionists, find those instruments of literacy yearning to be shared. This is a powerful community, dedicated to education and opportunity, that believes in literacy and most especially Braille literacy. No contribution of effort is too small, because together we can make Braille more readily available than ever before. Please join with me to make Bookshare.org the place that makes this happen!

Thank you!