

Book Search Engines on the Web: Use for Map-related Materials

by Joel Kovarsky

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this discussion is to allow better use of existing online sites for out-of-print book searches, specifically to facilitate the search for maps and related items. More and more old and antiquarian map related material is being listed on these sites, not just to be found on purely map related pages. These search engines are of variable quality and utility, and some familiarity with their use will be of value to novice and experienced collectors, scholars, librarians, and others shopping and browsing the marketplace. One issue for all the aggregate sites is the quality of images: high resolution files are a problem. Individual map dealer sites often have better images, although the availability and quality of images on many sites is consistently improving.

In my opinion, the most useful of these group search engines* are:

1. [Advanced Book Exchange \(ABE\)](#) - They have the biggest selection, largest group of multinational independent booksellers, but they have been moved away from an older model that focused on maintaining contacts between buyers and individual dealers. Some of the personal touch, or possibility thereof, has been squelched by the owners of the site. ABE is now owned by Amazon.com. They have some image capability, but this is limited. There are currently six [international sites](#). One problem with the explosion of a lot of cheap, used books, generally not of interest to the serious collector. On the other hand, they have refitted their search engine, which now includes an "any other word" function in the keyword field, so that finding material is no longer dependent on a dealer's keyword entry in a separate field. The default search is still for the cheapest copy, but you can set price ranges, and if looking for more valuable items you can reverse the pricing priority. Another addition has been the Rare Book Room, launched in Sept. 2004. The initial segment was on maps and atlases, but there hasn't been much in the cartographic realm since. There is also an associated directory of dealers who are more focused on rare, collectible books, and who also list on ABE. The search facility of the Rare Book Room was adjusted to allow the most expensive copies to appear first, but they still end up listing a lot of very cheap material, not really germane to their stated purpose. They do have some of the most sophisticated search capabilities around. Because of ABE's percentage fees charged to booksellers, some of their books are actually cheaper on other sites, where fees are not charged. This has been most noticeable for several dealers also listing on ILAB (see below), where the book charge is actually less, presumably due to this fee disparity. The metasearch engines all index ABE holdings, although there are individual quirks in terms of search results. ABE has just announced the acquisition of ZVAB (see discussion under ChooseBooks below).
2. [Biblio.com](#) - This has been growing rapidly, and is now the third largest of the independent bookseller sites. It has maintained its focus on the relationship between individual buyers and sellers, with a fairly sophisticated search engine. They may eventually replace ABE books as the best place for buyer/dealer contact, if they continue to grow, and ABE continues to downplay the ability to contact

the individual book dealers.

3. Bibliophile.net - A smaller site, administratively located in Zurich, Switzerland, with multilingual capabilities. Their image display capabilities are better than ABE books. In addition to providing a search engine for old maps and books, they also have a good bit of information pertaining the book arts, online library catalogues and more. They have the technical capabilities to host dealers sites (via their own hosting company ammonet), with construction of fairly sophisticated custom search engines. Although a bit more expensive than some no-frills hosting options, their familiarity with problems faced by online booksellers, coupled with site development capabilities, more than compensates for the cost. (These latter considerations apply more to dealers than collectors.)

4. [Antiqbook \(NAN\)](http://Antiqbook(NAN)) - This site is configured to search in a choice of English, Dutch, French or German. They are smaller than ABE, but still multinational. This is a nice site, well-run, with secured ordering for all offerings.

5. [International League of Antiquarian Booksellers \(ILAB\)](http://International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB))- The search engine at their site now also searches ABE and the ZVAB/Choosebooks sites. Given the acquisition of ZVAB by ABE, it may be that ILAB would also end up searching ABE holdings, although that is not yet clear.

6. [ABAA \(Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America\)](http://ABAA (Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America))- This site boasts more sophisticated and experienced dealers (as does the more expansive ILAB site noted in no. 5 above). The trade-off is that there are smaller selections and possibly greater expense. They have a greater concentration of uncommon material, usually with more elaborate descriptions than on the less specialized sites; virtually all of these dealers list on one or more of the above sites. ABAA currently has its website managed by Bibliopolis. ABAA membership is restricted to USA dealers.

7. ChooseBooks.com - This is a large, predominantly European site. It is very fast, with a nice search engine. ZVAB had merged with ChooseBooks, and ZVAB was acquired by. Whatever the ultimate configuration, these should be searchable via viaLibri's metasearch options.

9. TomFolio.com

10. International Antiquarian Mapsellers Association (IAMA) - This organization, and its attendant antiquarian map database, ceased to exist on 1 January 2013.

SECURED ORDERING ONLINE: Most of the sites above offer secured online ordering. Other options are always available for those wishing to avoid leaving credit card details with central sites.

(***NOTE:** Other sources, not focused on individual dealers, such as Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and Alibris are discussed below)

GENERAL DISCUSSION:

I would generally advise against using the "browse" function on most search engines, particularly as it applies to dealer catalogues. This function is often erratic, and too much inventory can be missed.

Also, although several search engines offer the ability to view recently uploaded books, that can be misleading in some circumstances. Some dealers may reload large catalogue segments when they 'update' files, and those items may appear over and over again, as recent listings. This isn't necessarily anyone's fault, but more of a programming issue, one that some sites have handled better than others. One last item, for those search engines offering the ability to restrict dates (i.e. before 1800, etc.). This is often based on having a single date field in an individual entry, which may not be the case for many dealers listings, so significant items may be missed with the application of this function.

ABE is the largest aggregate of independent booksellers online, currently boasting over 60 million listings, from about 12,000 independent booksellers from all over the world. Biblio, as noted, is growing rapidly. Some dealers sell via the Amazon Z-shops, though the ability to have a personalized relationship with a dealer is distinctly limited. Antiqbook is operated out of The Netherlands, and has links to specific map and print databases that have been in existence for some time, although the size of the site does not rival that of ABE, Biblio, or ILAB. One advantage to most the above listed sites is that you can easily reach independent bookdealers, although that situation has deteriorated on ABE. That direct contact allows for a much more personalized approach (even a telephone contact for the e-challenged!) something not readily done via out-of-print sites such as Alibris, Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble. Wherever you purchase, be sure there is some method for dispute resolution. Problems are relatively infrequent, and most established dealers are reasonable in these situations, but having a central complaint location in the event of a more intractable problem is occasionally useful.

ALL DEALERS DO NOT LIST ON ALL SEARCH ENGINES, so depending on the scarcity of the item, or your enthusiasm for comparative pricing, you may need to try more than one. Some of the "meta-search" engines (see below) will scan multiple sites simultaneously, but the results can be variable and quirky, and will not always substitute for going through the major independent book sites individually, especially for more unusual items or better descriptions. Eventually you will find which search-engines work best for you, and where you should look for common versus scarce material. A few boutique sites, such as the [ABAA \(Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America\)](#) , boast more sophisticated and experienced dealers (some of which can understandably add to pricing), although virtually all of the dealers at these more "exclusive" sites list via those larger independent sites above (ABE, Antiqbook, Biblio). The ABAA, limited to dealers from the USA, currently requires 4 years in the business plus a formal application and initiation process to join, but does not include many dealers from the more expansive [International League of Antiquarian Booksellers \(ILAB\)](#), which is composed of 20 national organizations (including ABAA) and has its own full-text book search engine (among the best online), accessible in French or English. (As noted above, the ABAA merely links to a subset of the ILAB database as their search engine.) The ILAB site has a keyboard of special alphabetical characters (a nice feature), and can restrict the search to a specific country or dealer. To be fair, some of these more restrictive sites do concentrate expertise in a way that cannot be done on some of the more general search sites, and may be of value in selected circumstances (if you find something interesting you can always look at the more general sites for comparative pricing, plus careful attention to condition). There is quite a bit of information for collectors at the ABAA site, although nothing currently focused on maps themselves. There are experienced, reliable dealers who may not belong to the more restrictive organizations.

There are other sources for out-of-print books on the web, some better known to consumers due to extensive advertising campaigns. Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble boast out-of-print searches, but they do this by using listings available through those independent sites listed above, and adding surcharges of 10-30% (less with more expensive items). [Alibris](#) is marketed as an independent site, especially geared to libraries, but most of their out-of-print offerings are still gleaned from participating independent booksellers from the sites above. Although they have ceased adding surcharges, some dealers hike their prices prior to listing on Alibris, due to the 20% commission charged to dealers on each sale. They have a smaller selection of major antiquarian and map related material than many of the larger independent sites.

I am not simply indicting those sites that resort to price mark-ups, as they need to have a way to pay for their operations, but the consumer is not always aware of the source of the books and the extent of the price-hike.

SPECIFIC SEARCH TIPS*: Not all online listings are in English, and it is advisable to omit specialized accent marks from your searches, as this can cause difficulties with many of the larger sites which are mostly English based, although the ILAB, Antiqbook and Bibliopoly sites do offer some multilingual search capabilities. The day may come when languages can be quickly translated back and forth, but it is not here yet. You should distinguish between searching for a specific book and listing "wants" on a specific search site. With the latter, a service offered at most of the above sites (except Antiqbook), you should be very careful and precise with title and author, unless you want to be overwhelmed with a blizzard of excess information and lists. Searching for a specific item is a different matter. You want to start with a few words (perhaps a cartographer, specific map or region), always with careful attention to spelling. If you get too specific or mis-spell, you will miss listings. You can refine the search parameters later, using available criteria such as dates, price, keywords, and other tricks (see the search tips at each individual site, where available). Regarding the vagaries of electronic glitches which can create access difficulty, that can happen anywhere, anytime, and on any site. A number of these search engines have capabilities to order listings based on price, individual dealer, country of origin, and more. With regard to "first edition" restrictions, you may miss inventory listed by dealers who do not use programs with individual line entries for those details. Similar problems may occur when attempting to sort by publication dates.

***Use of quotation marks ("..."):** Several sites allow you to enclose a phrase (such as "hunting map") in quotation marks, limiting the search to the specific phrase, rather than just the 2 separate words anywhere in the search field. Detailed discussion as to specific types of searches, such as boolean, are beyond the scope of this page.

***Specific search tips:** These are available on several sites mentioned herein.

META-SEARCH ENGINES: These sites, as mentioned above, search across a range of the independent or other aggregate sites, often listing the cheapest volumes first. Some of these engines have fluctuating (and undisclosed?) relationships with various booksale sites previously mentioned (Barnes & Noble, Alibris, Amazon.com, etc.), for the purpose of listing the preferred inventories closer to the

top. I would not consider this an attempt to deceive, as much as understandable marketing arrangements. Specific items may still be missed, and you must still pay careful attention to the way your searches are configured. The indexing systems of Bookfinder and AddAll can be quirky at times. Some of the larger sites for this sort of general query include:

1. [AddAll](#)
2. [BookFinder.com](#) Note: This is now owned by AbeBooks.
3. [viaLibri](#) Note: This is a very expansive (and arguably the best) metasearch option. It has some multilingual capabilities for translating individual book descriptions (after initial retrieval). There are a number of other utilities at this site, which is likely gaining in popularity. They have a rather extensive "hints and caveats" page for suggestions in using their search engine. They can search across many new, used and out-of-print sites simultaneously.
4. [Booksold](#) Note: This site basically allows searches of AddAll and BookFinder.

There are other sites of these sorts, but those above are among the best known. They allow you to search for yourself, as opposed to other sites where you submit a specific title of a book to be bought (or sold), while they search for you and add their own percentage (and their own energy or lack thereof). The latter type of site may be useful if you need special assistance or do not have the time to explore on your own.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: Like much of the online world, these book (and map) search sites and their individual capabilities will be in a state of flux for the foreseeable future. There will be inevitable fallout, as these sites begin to consolidate positions. In general, I prefer the larger independent sites, for reasons including pricing (they do not add surcharges), selection, search configuration and personalized service with individual booksellers. As a start, an individual look at the ABE and ILAB sites (or a metasearch engine such as viaLibri) will cover most of the available antiquarian offerings in these systems. ILAB focuses much more on establishing individual dealer contact, something ABE lost. Some people are likely to use the larger name-brand sites, like Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Alibris, due to their perceived ease of use and broader commercial familiarity. Some of this is a result of the strength of their advertising campaigns. Still, in fairness, the Amazon site can be particularly useful in the search for some relatively new or inexpensive reference works. The meta-search engines have their uses (with viaLibri perhaps the best of these), but again, results can be variable for a number of technical reasons. Take some time and develop some facility with these modes of book and map searching. It will be rewarded, but for certain types of material it will remain necessary to visit the individual websites of established dealers. Consider all this to be the digital analogue of "roaming the stacks" of the old-fashioned, if unfortunately endangered, independent book shop

Last Modified: 5 May 2015