Project Gutenberg
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Not too long ago, one of the reasons that literature was a subject parents didn't like was that there were too many books to be bought. A child could pass biology with one text book, but for literature, one had to get a *Macbeth*, a *Pride and Prejudice,* and a *Huckleberry Finn,* plus a Blake's *Lyrical Ballads*.

But guess what … all parents should like literature once more. The computer is now in cahoots with parents' pockets to put literature back at the centre of literacy. It is being done through free e-book repositories such as Project Gutenberg, which is the oldest producer of free e-books on the Internet.

Now wait a minute … not all literature books. Not contemporary West Indian literature. Our literature is still too young. There are one or two 19th century books on Questia—a pay online site, and J. J. Thomas' *Froudacity, West Indian Fables* is already in Project Gutenberg. But no Webber's *Those that be in Bondage*, far less Kamau Brathwaite's *Born to Slow Horses* for which he won the 2006 Griffin Prize.

But this is no reason to suck your teeth. The only hitch is to get a computer and DSL or broadband wireless access in the home, which to me is as good a sacrifice for Christmas as brand new furniture. For there are still too many homes without reading material, too many without computers, too many children not being prepared to access e-learning, which seems destined to be a deciding factor in societal well-being in the twenty-first century. Therefore, parents need to consider as one of their gift-giving choices, enabling their families to enter the digital age. And with the School Improvement Plan (SIP) money in primary schools and computer labs in all new secondary schools, there should be ample support.

Project Gutenberg is the brainchild of one Michael Hart, who sought to make books available free of charge. It now has about 19,000 e-books in its online archives which can be freely downloaded and stored or read off the computer screen. It does not only contain books found on secondary school literature syllabuses. The young ones can find *Through the Looking-Glass, Peter Pan*, *Aesop's Fables* .... In other words, just go to <http://www.gutenberg.org/> and see if the site has what you want.

Of course, Project Gutenberg is not only a literature archive and although copyright availability limits the books transcribed, it is a very impressive download site. Moreover, it can be used in many ways by the enterprising literature teacher, for example, transcription of books is done by volunteers who can register on the site. Bibliomania is another good e-archive, and with the entry of Google into e-archiving, accessibility of texts on the whole will increase.

One aspect of volunteering with Project Gutenberg is proof-reading a page of an e-book. A teacher, for example, can work alongside a sixth form in such an exercise. The benefits of editing, close reading, and literary appreciation in such a commitment are immense.

One can choose a book being prepared to work on. One checks the page against a scanned image alongside. No need to fear, because it will be checked in the same way by another volunteer.

But a huge bonus is that students can become hooked into being part of the making. One of the reasons that our young people seem uncommitted to reading is perhaps that most of the books that they have to read are produced abroad out of their sight. With Project Gutenberg, in a proxy kind of way, a sixth former can say "That is my page. I worked on that page."

So what are we going to do about the near absence of West Indian Literature online? That's a question for our greats, their publishers, copyright lawyers, and investors to answer, as they decide whether they want Caribbean literature to thrive or not to thrive. But we could help with inserting republications of 19th century finds.

There is a stimulating ongoing debate on the future of the printed book. Rest assured, though, that the technology of reading and writing will continue to evolve as it did with the advent of the Gutenberg press in the 15th century.

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