

New search engine connects literary dots

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This computer image released by SmallDemons.com shows the home page of Small Demons, an encyclopedia and "Storyverse" that catalogues names, places, songs, products and other categories for thousands of books. (AP Photo/SmallDemons.com)

(AP)—Author Jennifer Gilmore is reading a biography of the late David

Foster Wallace. She's curious about his most famous book, the novel "Infinite Jest," and wants to poke around on the Internet to learn more.

Her destination is Small Demons, www.smalldemons.com, an encyclopedia and "Storyverse" that catalogues names, places, songs, products and other categories for thousands of books.

Officially launched in August, Small Demons is the book world's latest mind game and guilty pleasure and a proving ground that everything really is connected. You can find out how many books mention the Beatles or the Pacific Ocean or Rice Krispies. You can find answers to questions you never meant to ask, like whether writers favor Marlboros or Camels (Camels have the edge, 85-65), or which brands of cold medicine are cited in EL James' "Fifty Shades of Grey" (NyQuil, Advil, Tylenol).

"I was sure they featured 'Infinite Jest,' which of course they have," Gilmore, whose novels include "Something Red" and "Golden Country," wrote in a recent email. "I can get deep(er) into the Wallace brain there and as I do so, learn about the context, the ether around the book. I can relent and buy Wittgenstein or 'Ethan Frome' or Irving Berlin."

Small Demons founder Valla Vakili, a former Yahoo executive, dates the idea back to 2005, November to be exact. He read Jean-Claude Izzo's novel "Total Chaos" and became curious about the book's setting, in Marseille. The main character was a French police officer with a taste for malt whiskey and jazz and blues.



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"I had a vacation planned to Madrid and Paris, and I changed my Paris leg to go to Marseille instead," Vakili says. "I spent a week in Marseille drinking the drinks, eating the food, and roaming the streets described in the book. I came back from that trip convinced that many of the best experiences we can find are within books. And that if we could gather them all up and put them in one place, we could unlock a world of pretty incredible discovery."

The company's name, which could be mistaken for a New Wave band, is itself a game of free association. Vakili was inspired in part by a Jorge Luis Borges passage declaring that history "is the handwriting produced

by a Minor god in order to communicate with a Demon." As Vakili sees it, "minor Gods" are writers, and demons the passion to read and to write. And so, "Small Demons," or, as Vakili likes to joke, the devil is in the details.

Looking through the site is like knocking on a door, then another and another. You might start with Doris Kearns Goodwin's "Team of Rivals," the basis for Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln." Click on the image of the book's cover and you will find a variety of sub-categories: People in the book (from Lincoln himself to abolitionist Frederick Douglass), places identified, songs mentioned ("The Star-Spangled Banner," "La Marseillaise"), newspapers cited.

Each sub-category links to other sub-categories. Click on the icon for "The Star-Spangled Banner" and you'll see a list of other books mentioning it, among them the unlikely bedfellows Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" and Ronald Reagan's memoir "An American Life." Click on the cover image of "Don Quixote," which is referred to in "Team of Rivals," and you'll find additional background on the Cervantes novel and a "Buy" tab that allows you to purchase it from Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble and independent stores.

Publishers are sensitive to letting outside companies use copyrighted text and several members of the Association of American Publishers sued Google when the Internet giant began collecting snippets from books without permission. But Small Demons has the cooperation of most of the major publishers. One of the first was Simon & Schuster, where authors include Stephen King, Bob Woodward and David McCullough.

"It was a unique approach that looked at the interior of books and provided discovery and browsing of books by utilizing fun and imaginative concepts," said Simon & Schuster's chief digital officer, Ellie Hirschhorn. She cites a Simon & Schuster book, Walter Isaacson's

"Steve Jobs," as a text she enjoyed exploring. "Jobs himself was such a curious guy and his story had everything from Bob Dylan to marijuana to Bill Gates. It's a fun way to drill around."

Dani Shapiro became curious about *Small Demons* after she learned that her novel "Black & White" was included. Published in 2007, the book tells of a daughter trying to escape the influence of her mother, a famous photographer. The book is rich in literary and pop culture, from Shakespeare to "The Flintstones." Shapiro herself was surprised by some of the references catalogued.

"Honestly I didn't even remember some of them, especially when they're bumped up against one another like a strange, out-of-time fantasy dinner party. Nietzsche next to Warhol next to Kant and Meryl Streep! But philosophy and the 1980s art world and fame are central preoccupations of that novel," Shapiro wrote in a recent email. "I find it fascinating to see the cultural and historical references, especially in fiction, laid out visually—sort of a Rorschach test of the writer's mind and preoccupations."

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