
If the clever title isn’t enough to interest a book historian in this e-resource, the name behind it likely will be. Robert Darnton is a renowned historian specializing in the French book in the era of the Revolution. Recently, however, he has expanded his focus to digital scholarship, and as such, he is likely the perfect person to launch such an exploratory resource.

Released in September 2014, Darnton’s Literary Tour de France details the provincial French book trade during the two decades before the Revolution. As he writes on the website, this
Robert Darnton. A Literary Tour de France

project is the result of fifty years of study undertaken at the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) and several French archives. At the end of this period, Darnton determined that the amount of information he had gathered was too overwhelming for a monograph, and so he decided to release his research for others to interpret as they will.

Although users can chart their own journey through the website, its structure is based on an actual journey embarked upon in 1778 by Jean-Francois Farvager, a clerk for the STN, throughout provincial France. Darnton features 16 towns from this trip, each with its own section accompanied by the relevant archival material and secondary sources. Darnton’s site excels in engaging users of all interest levels. For those looking to learn a bit about the book trade in Revolutionary France, following Farvager’s journey and reading the highlights will suffice. For those looking to go in-depth, the site provides the manuscripts themselves for review, sometimes scanned and sometimes in transcription, Darnton and his team’s original notes and analysis, and PDF files of Darton’s other writings which go beyond the scope of this specific project. A remarkable amount of information which was heretofore unavailable to the majority of researchers is now presented in an open-access capacity, which is no small achievement.

A Literary Tour de France excels in terms of design, as well. The overall format is clear and well-organized, as every section is neatly labeled and flows well when exploring the site either as the narrative journey or simply as a repository of resources. If users do not see what they are looking for while browsing, a search bar is provided which references both the site and the attached manuscript material. The color scheme complements the images of documents, maps, and illustrations, and the fonts are legible and elegant, with the exception of Verdana, which appears out of place. Such critiques may appear trivial, but digital resources are inherently visual resources, and it is important that they are well designed for ease of access as well as presentation.

On the other hand, while not necessarily a flaw, determining the proper classification and purpose for this resource proves tricky. Although the site presents curated information in a visually appealing manner, it is more than an exhibition; however, as its focus is so limited, and its content is without the conventions of academic publishing, it is not exactly a scholarly
electronic resource, either. It could potentially fall into the digital humanities, though its information is presented plainly, without any technological linking or analysis.

Furthermore, for the sake of accurate scholarship one must consider the role that Darnton and his site play as intermediary in providing said sources. For example, many of the manuscripts on the site appear as transcriptions. Even the best of scholars and their brightest of research assistants make occasional mistakes, and thus it is difficult to give full authority to the transcription as a source without verifying their accuracy against the originals. Even where the manuscripts are provided as scans, it is possible that a page was missed that could inform the conclusion on a particular topic.

In summary, the *Literary Tour de France* is a valuable resource for anyone with an interest in the eighteenth-century French book trade as well as the intersection between book history and digital initiatives. The site would benefit from the addition of interactive analytical elements, but this project is nevertheless a significant source of information on its topic and a pleasure to explore. As libraries and academia take on an increasingly technological focus, other scholars and repositories would do well to use Darnton’s website as a model for a well-organized and well-designed digital project. *A Literary Tour de France* provides a solid foundation for those beginning research; for scholars looking to publish from the resources available throughout the site, however, the best option remains to consult the originals.

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