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Review of Creating Database-Backed Library Web Pages: Using Open Source Tools.

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David Lodwick

CREATING DATABASE-BACKED LIBRARY WEB PAGES: USING OPEN SOURCE TOOLS

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CREATING DATABASE-BACKED LIBRARY WEB PAGES: USING OPEN SOURCE TOOLS. Stephen R. Westman. *Chicago: American Library Association, 2006, 268 pp., ISBN 0-8389-0910-8, paperback.*

Perhaps you are one of those librarians “who would like to try their hand at developing database-backed web pages but are not sure where to start.” You have no technical expertise of your own, and none to draw on. You know nothing about database design and nothing about programming. You realize that you aren’t even sure what a database-backed web page is. Formerly you might have gone to the bookshelf and selected an 800-page volume on database design, another thick tome on structured query language (SQL), one or two (or three) on computer programming, and yet another on web servers. But along comes Stephen Westman with one thin book that offers to teach you all you need to know on the subject, from scratch, in plain language written for librarians. An ambitious undertaking, to be sure.

Westman’s book is in three parts: first he looks at relational databases in general, structured query language (SQL) and relational database management software; second he introduces programming skills; finally he puts the whole package together using an Apache web server. Throughout, the emphasis is on open source software, which Westman strongly advocates as the preferred alternative to commercial products from Microsoft and others.

The first section, describing the nature of relational databases, is quite good. It may not be quite as clear an exposition as *Inside Relational Databases*,² by Mark Whitehorn and Bill Marklyn, but those authors filled an entire book, while Westman needs only a couple dozen pages to make his points. Then it’s time to roll up the sleeves and create a database using MySQL. This section consists of meticulous step-by-step directions and screen shots, e.g., “Once you have clicked on Go, the account will be created and the screen shown in figure 3-13 will be created.” *A word of warning: This book is about learning by doing. If you don’t intend to prop*

this book next to your computer and actually follow along in the creation of a database-backed web page using open source tools, you may be reading the wrong book.

Once the database has been created and populated with data, the focus turns to creating reports with the PHP scripting language. Westman seeks to reassure his readers that, although the thought of writing a computer program might fill many librarians with feelings of fear and dread, it's actually no more difficult than cooking dinner (As an example, in Appendix A he sets forth a recipe for shrimp etouffee, translated into programming code). Using the cooking analogy, he walks the reader through an otherwise fairly standard introduction to programming, describing variables, arrays, conditions, and functions. Then it's time to create the real thing. Once again, code snippets and screen shots are used liberally to illustrate the process (Regrettably, some of the code snippets are so small that only those readers with the most powerful bifocals will be able to fully appreciate them). At the end of the day, more than a few librarians will likely conclude that, in fact, cooking dinner is a whole lot easier than programming with PHP.

The final section begins with a discussion of project planning, filled with lists, charts, and diagrams. Once again, the level of detail is meticulous. This will be welcome to some readers wary of breezy instructional manuals; others may find that the prose seems at times to be mired in detail, e.g.:

The difficulty is that how you answer these questions has an effect on how you configure MySQL to store your data and thereby what you will be able to do with that data. By default, MySQL uses the MyISAM file format – one that provides neither transaction nor foreign key constraint support. To get those features, you need to set up those tables for which you wish to use these features (both the primary key and the foreign key tables) as InnoDB type files.

However, one drawback to that course is that InnoDB does not support the FULLTEXT indexing we used in chapter 5 to implement keyword searching. For that, we need MyISAM files. Therefore

It's not that the information isn't useful, it's just that some readers who 146 pages ago were raw beginners may feel that they are in way over their heads.

Having planned the project, we forge ahead with a comparatively lengthy section called "Programming the Application." Here, as elsewhere throughout the book, Westman refers the reader to auxiliary materials online: "I have given a cursory introduction to these functions. Please consult Functions_Guide.pdf in the companion materials download file" Again, readers may differ in their reactions, with some pleased at the substantial bonus material (268 files in the download file) while others are dismayed that the entire topic is not fully covered in a single slim volume. Westman wraps up with a discussion of security considerations, public interfaces, and development procedures. Before concluding, though, he acknowledges the "whirlwind" nature of the preceding chapters and encourages readers to consult additional resources as their exploration of database-backed web pages continues. Those librarians who have come this far will likely have the resolve to continue the hunt.

The book includes appendices, a glossary, an index, and an extensive online bibliography.

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