Open Book

Managing Your eBooks with Calibre

By Lachlan Roy

Open Books: Your Guide to Calibre and ebook Management

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Introduction

Whether you've stumbled across these newfangled eBook things and you want a bit more information or you're an eBook junkie struggling to organise your vast digital library, I'm sure there'll be something for you here.

It may be surprising to you, but eBooks are far from a recent development. Project Gutenburg, a repository of digital texts, dates back to 1971. Dedicated to providing eBooks in open formats, Gutenburg's collection can be read on any device today. Such electronic libraries only became familiar to most people, however, with the advent of Amazon's Kindle, Apple's iPad and other devices that make reading easy. Not only are these devices easier to use than computers from the 1970s; they're also a great deal more portable.

Sadly, for the most part, texts purchased using such devices are not open. You cannot easily download a book from your Kindle and read it on a Kobo eReader, for example. This is because of technology known as Digital Rights Management, which I'll explain in more detail shortly.

This guide hopes to help you find, organize and read open books, and only briefly discusses books protected with DRM. The good news: with a program called Calibre, open books can be easily read on any eReader, from the Kindle to the iPhone to the Kobo.

Interested? Keep reading. But if you've got a Kindle collection you may want to keep reading anyway, as I'll briefly outline how to strip those books of DRM.
Like I said, there's something here for everyone, so let's get started!

eBooks: An Introduction

What are eBooks?

Chances are that you've come across eBooks before in some capacity, even if you haven't realised it.

You're reading one right now, for example.

eBooks are simply *electronic books*, where all the content of a printed book is accessed digitally instead of being put down on paper. Appearances can vary dramatically – from a plain text copy of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to Apple's colourful iBook edition of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, eBooks can be focused solely on the brilliant writing or a thing of beauty in themselves.

Much like paper books, really; just distributed digitally.

Where to find eBooks

An increasing number of bookstores are opening up an online store, where you can buy eBooks alongside physical copies. These are generally the best places to buy the latest and greatest books, as the resulting eBooks are not tied to any one device – you are free to use them however you wish.

If you already have an eReader (a device designed specifically for reading eBooks), chances are that it will have a corresponding eBook store which will sync perfectly with your device.

There are lots of free books, too, however! For the classics look no further than Project Gutenburg, a repository of books that are no longer covered by copyright. There are other places to find free ebooks, such as Google's recently opened bookstore (US only, sorry). You'll also find many free eBook reading blogs, such as these fantastic books about social media and blogging.

It is also possible to find eBooks using bittorrent – just remember that downloading copyrighted materials is illegal, and the money that authors receive when you buy their books is often their sole source of income!

DRM

EBooks that you buy from online stores will usually have some form of Digital Rights Management (DRM) to prevent you from sharing the file. This is similar to how songs

bought on iTunes used to only be playable on up to 5 computers linked to the buyer's iTunes account.

DRM will stop you not only from distributing the eBook to others; it also stops you from converting it to use it the way you want, too. This locks you into using only hardware made by the company you bought the book from (e.g. Sony's Reader Store books will only work on Sony Reader devices), which is far from ideal.

There are ways to remove DRM, but they aren't easy.

Formats and Devices

The same eBooks can be presented in a number of different formats; just like you can get the same song with an *mp3* or *m4a* extension, eBooks have a few common formats that you need to know about.

- Plain text (.txt) – this is the most basic of eBooks and contains nothing but the text itself. That means no headings, no bold or italics, no formatting, colours or pictures. However, this simplicity also brings a lot of benefits; plain text provides the smallest file size for the content, and pretty much any device is able to open and interpret it. This makes plain text perfect for archiving large amounts of information.
- Rich Text (.rtf) – this is a step up from plain text and introduces formatting such as tables, text formatting and images. However, while it is easily editable on a computer and can be read by most electrical devices, it isn't designed to be manipulated by eReaders. This basically means that while you'll be able to read it on a Kindle, for example, you won't easily be able to change the size of the text.
- EPUB (.epub) – EPUB replaced the Open eBook format in 2007 as the standard for eBooks. Designed specifically to work perfectly with as many devices as possible and to make text reflowing (that is, making text display properly regardless of the size of the text or the size of the screen) work the way it should. Practically every piece of eReader software or hardware is capable of reading EPUB files (notably, the Kindle cannot.)
- Portable Document Format (.pdf) – this is the format that you're reading from right now! PDF files are based on an open format that has been around since 1993. Most computers, and many eReader devices, are able to open PDFs without a third party program. While they're great for sharing documents in situations where there would normally be compatibility issues, they aren't great for use as eBooks as text reflow doesn't work very well. This means that in most cases PDF pages are displayed a lot like images and require the reader to zoom in and move around the page to read it.

- Mobipocket (.prc/.mobi) – this format is based on the older Open eBook format (which has been largely superseded by the EPUB standard). However, it's still quite popular. Most .prc/.mobi files are found through the Mobipocket web store.
- Kindle eBook (.azw) – every book you download from the Amazon store to a Kindle or to the Kindle app on your computer or mobile device is an *azw* file. It's actually almost exactly the same as a mobipocket eBook – it just uses a slightly different indexing system.

Enter calibre

What Is Calibre?

Calibre is an application that is used for managing your eBook files. You can think of it as your own personal automated library; you import the eBook files and it automatically sorts them for you, allowing you to quickly search for the books you want and do all sorts of cool things with them that I'll touch on in a moment.
In many ways, you can think of calibre as being a sort of *iTunes for eBooks*. This program sorts your books, allows you to access them quickly and makes it easy to transfer books to various eReaders.

Calibre is a *cross-platform* application, which means that it has versions for Windows, Mac OS X and Linux. That's great news; it means that you'll be able to use calibre no matter what computer you use and that if you use computers that use different operating systems they'll all work together in exactly the same way.

As a quick aside, 'calibre' (that is, without a capital letter) is the way that the developer intends it to be spelled, so that's how you'll see it mentioned in this guide.

It's also important to mention that calibre only works with eBooks that *do not have DRM*. This means that any books that you buy from a store such as Apple's iBook store, Amazon's Kindle store or Sony's Reader store won't work in calibre in their original state. However, there are ways to get around it – they're just a little grey-hat. You'll find some more details towards the end of this manual.

What Can It Do?

eBook Library Management

You can think of calibre as your one-stop personal, automated library. Once you add your books to the library it will allow you to sort by title, author, series, publish date, the publisher or even the date you added it to the library or the size of the file. You're also able to edit all of this information (for example, you can correct an eBook with the author's name spelled incorrectly, or add the name of the publisher if it hasn't been included).

That's not it, though! Calibre also allows you to add custom tags to eBook files that let you filter to custom, specific groups of books. You can also give eBooks ratings so you can remember books that you particularly enjoyed.

eBook Format Conversion

As you saw earlier, there are quite a few different eBook formats – and those were just the common ones! While most of them are compatible with the vast majority of devices, sometimes you'll have a couple of different devices that simply require two different versions to read the files.

Never fear! Calibre is able to convert pretty much any (non-DRM) format to pretty much any other format and manage the multiple copies. There's no need to use another program to get the job done.

Syncing to eReaders

Calibre recognises most of the popular eReaders by default and allows you to choose which eBooks to put on which devices without having to use another application.

Calibre also has a feature called a *content server*, which allows you to connect to the calibre library directly from the eReader itself wirelessly (assuming your device has wireless capabilities, of course!)

Grabbing the News

Another interesting feature that calibre has is its ability to take the latest articles from almost any news source and package them into a single eBook. It's great for taking the news with you on your eReader, or for your own personal archives that you can access offline.

Hosting Your eBook Collection

As I mentioned earlier, calibre has a built in feature called a *content server*. This basically creates a list of books that can be accessed via a web browser by any computer or device on your local network.

If you have port forwarding set up and are able to connect to your computer from elsewhere, you'll be able to connect to your digital library from anywhere in the world with an internet connection. Any book, anytime, anywhere!

How To Get It

Calibre is really, really simple to get. You can just click this link or go to http://www.calibre-ebook.com/download to get to calibre's download page, where you'll see this:

Click on your operating system and then click on the first link you see. I use OS X, so this is what I'll see and what I'll click on:
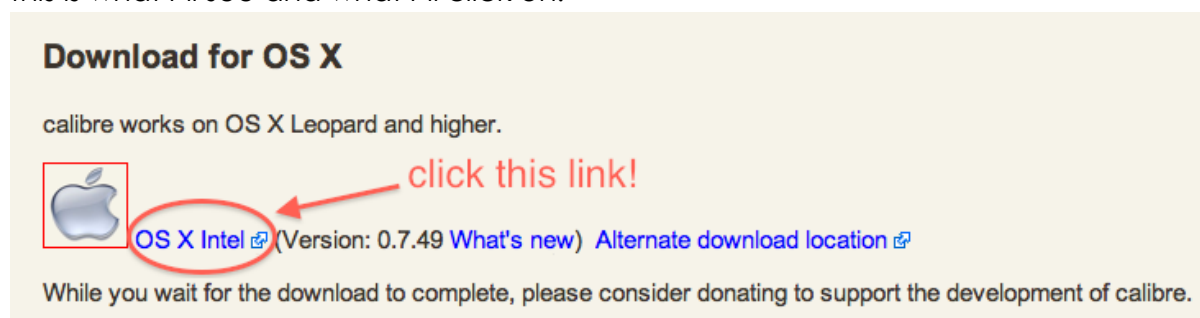
Once you click on the link you need it'll start downloading the installer file; that'd be either an .exe file for Windows or a .dmg file for OS X. The Linux installation process is a little more in depth, but there are plenty of instructions on the Linux download page on calibre's website for you to follow.

How To Use It

When you've finished installing calibre you'll be greeted by a "welcome window", which looks something like this:
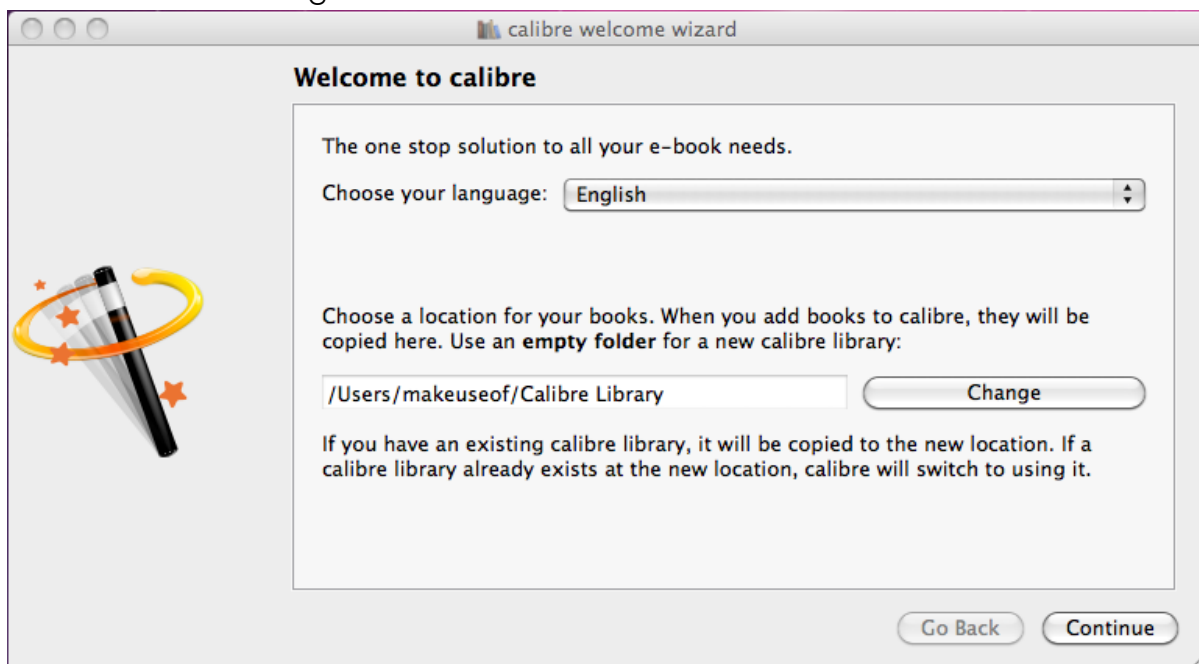
The default save location is as good as most places (unless you want to use the DropBox kludge which we'll explain later) and is typically in your user folder (usually /Users/<yourusername>/Calibre Library on OS X and Ubuntu or C:/Users/<yourusername>/Calibre Library).
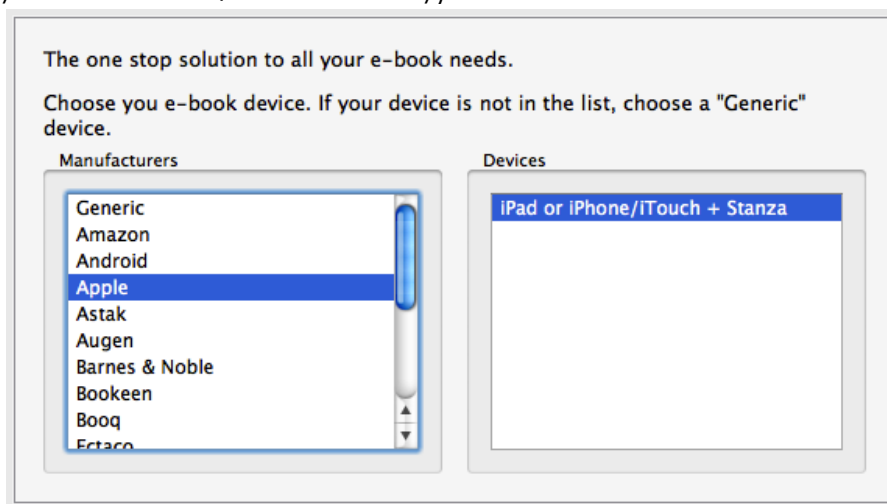
Once you've chosen a place for your calibre library, you'll be asked if you use an eBook device and given a chance to select it. You don't have to do this, but it'll make things a lot easier if you plan to be syncing that device to calibre later.
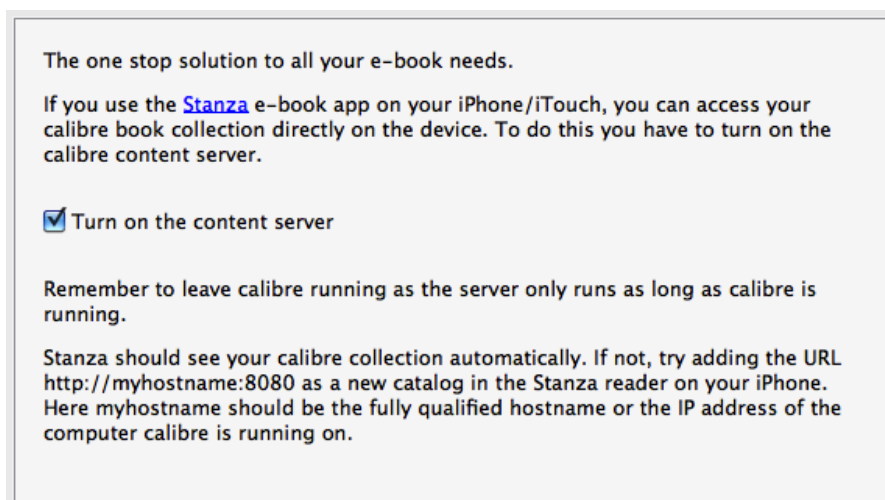
The last setting to worry about is whether or not you want to enable the content
server. There aren't really any reasons why you would want to turn this off,
particularly if you want to access your library from elsewhere.

That's pretty much it! You'll finish the wizard and then be greeted with a (mostly)
empty library that looks like this:
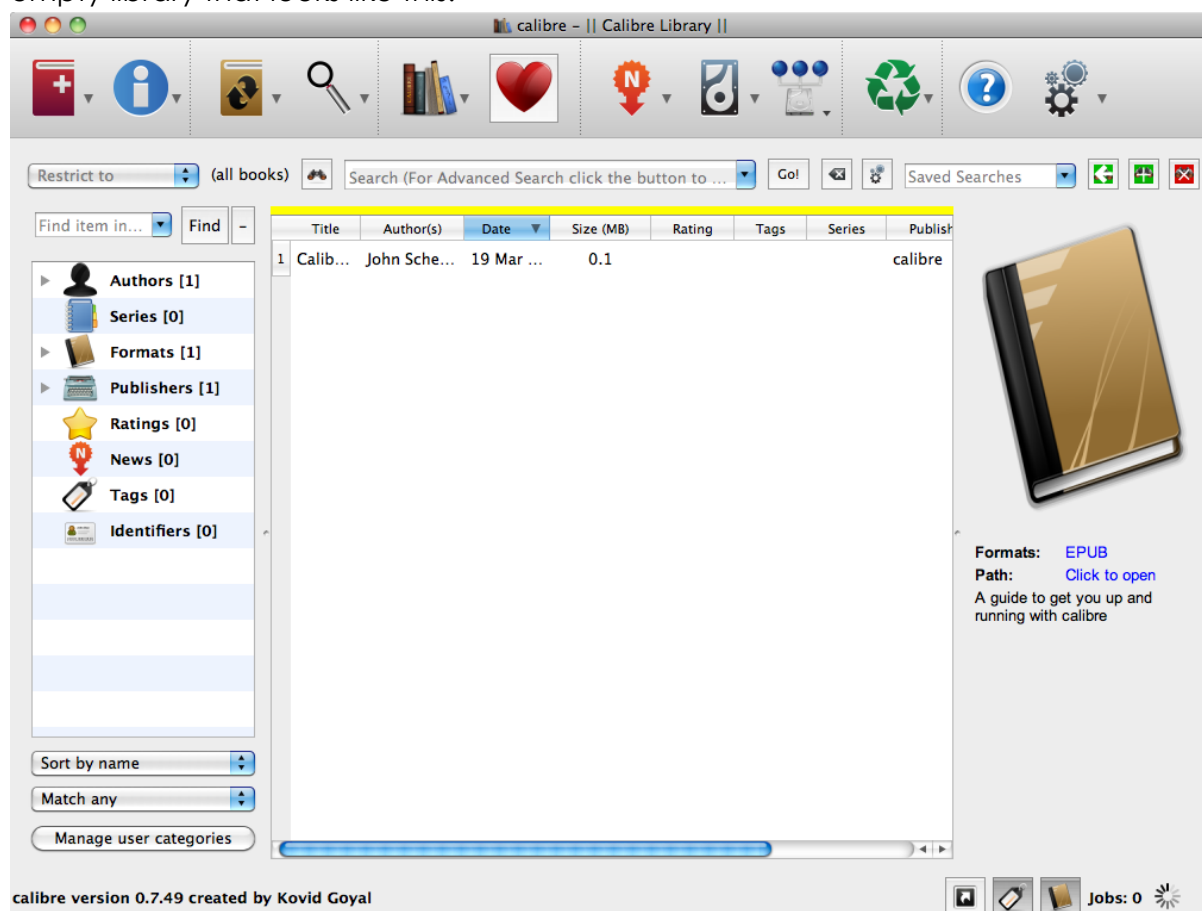
Finally, let's have a quick look at the icons at the top of the window: that's the
toolbar where you go to do pretty much anything:

From left to right the icons are labelled 'Add books', 'Edit metadata', 'Convert

Books', 'View', 'Fetch news', 'Save to disk', 'Connect/share', 'Remove books', 'Help' and 'Preferences'.

The icon with the books basically provides information on your library as a whole; the heart is for donating to calibre, if you so choose.

How To Add Books To Your eBook Library

Obviously the first thing you want to do is get your books into the library; it's really simple. Just click on the big red book with a + sign on it (you can see it in the top left hand corner) and then choose the appropriate option.

For most people it'll be "Add books from directories, including sub directories (Multiple books per directory, assumes every eBook file is a different book)".
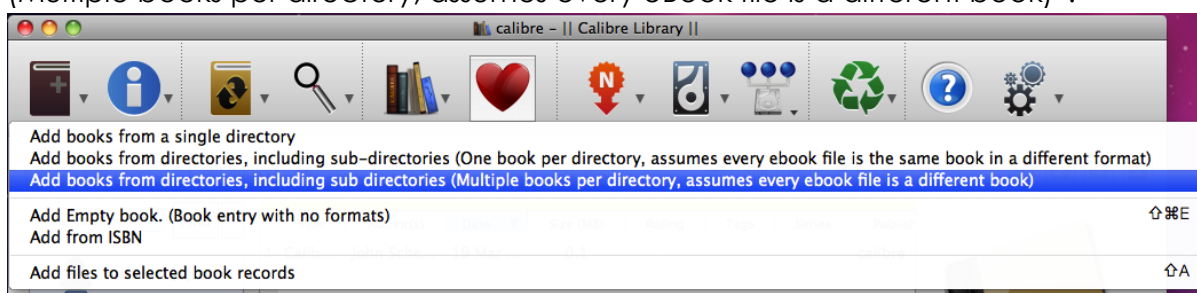
Next up is to browse to the folder where you keep all your books. For example, all my books are kept in a folder called "Books" in my public folder, as you can see below:
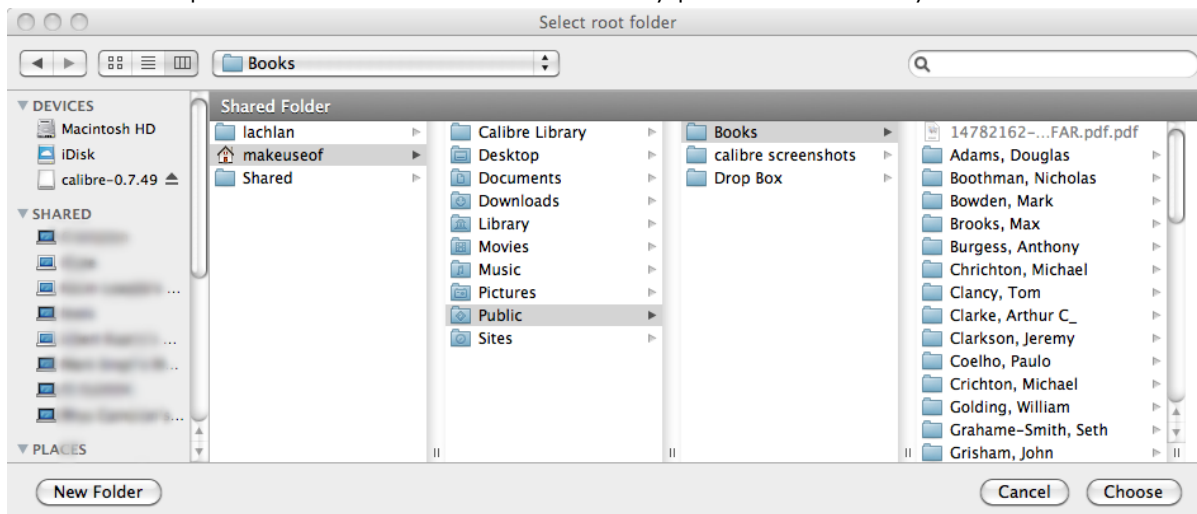

That's it! Calibre will now create a copy of all your books in the calibre library folder you created earlier. Once it's finished you can delete the original folder (as copies have been made of all the files) or you can keep it as a backup archive of sorts. When calibre has finished importing all your books that empty library will start to look a little like this:
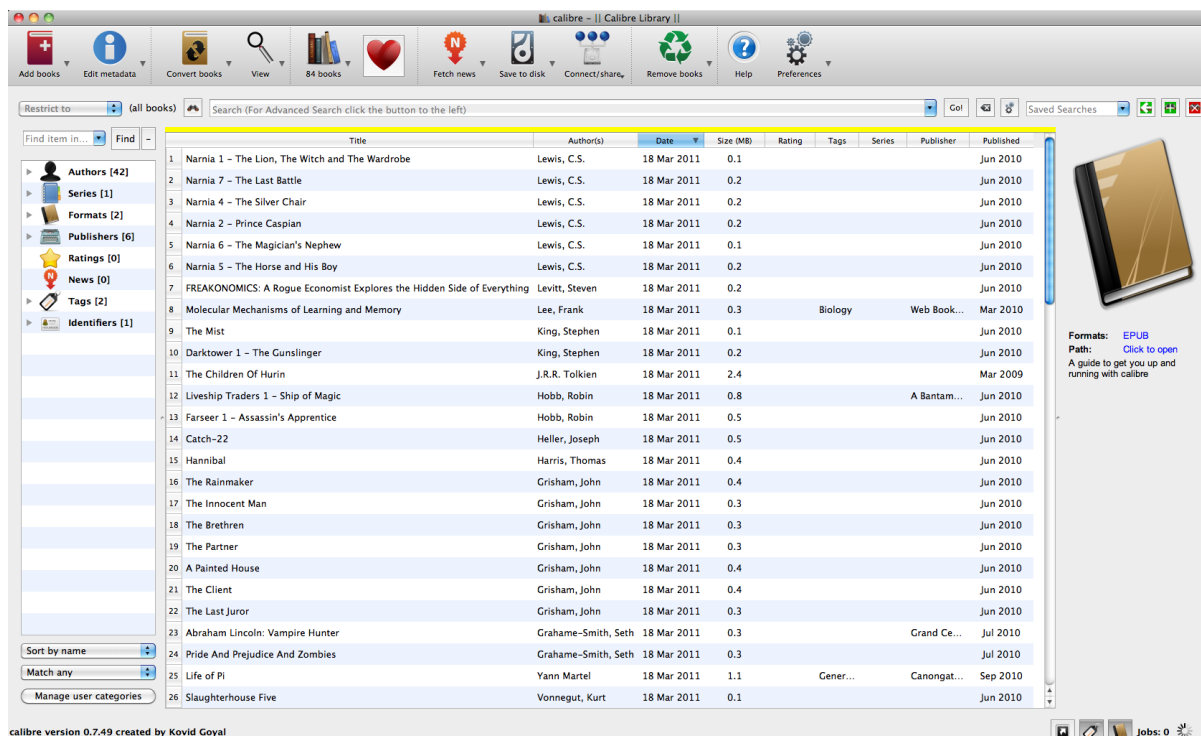
How To Add/Edit Metadata

So, I've imported all my books, but because of how the books are organised in folders calibre is sorting them by the authors' first names. That's not what I want! Luckily I can just click on the big 'i' in a blue circle in the top left labelled "edit metadata" and select whether I want to edit a single book or in bulk.

I'll start with *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (or, as calibre is seeing it, by "Golding, William".
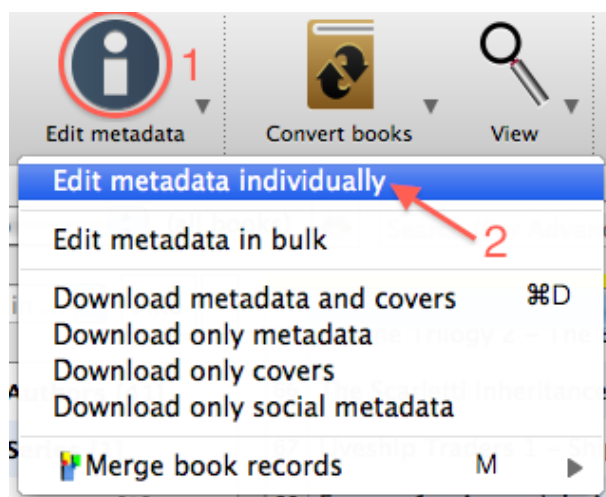

I select *Lord of the Flies*, click on the 'i' and then on "Edit metadata individually". This is what I see:
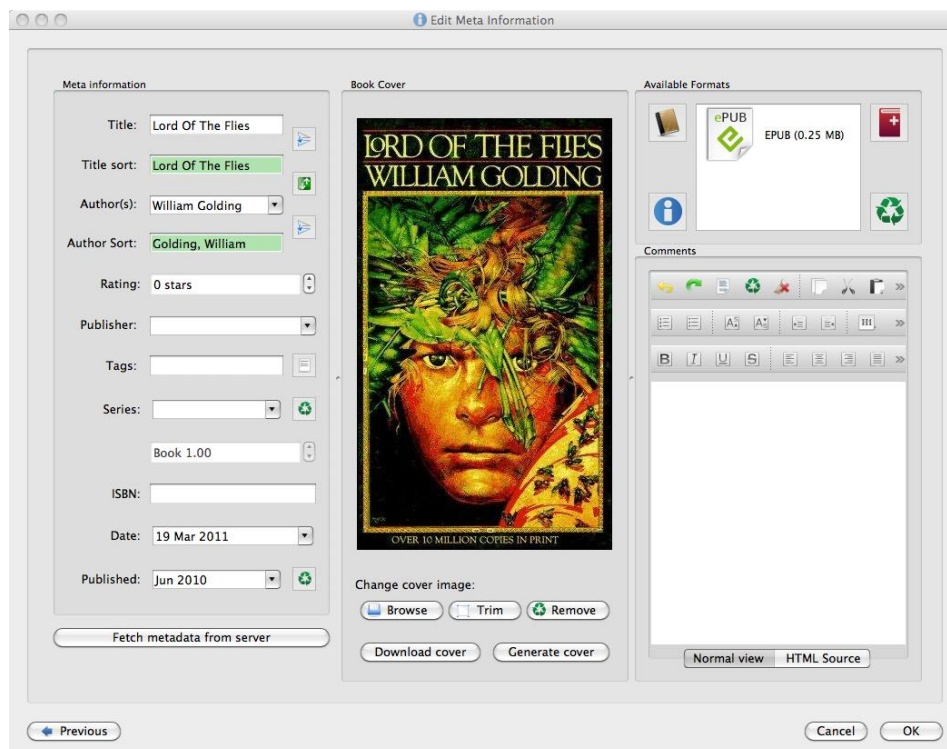
Here I've already changed my problem: originally the Author was "Golding, William"
and the Author Sort was "William, Golding,". All I need to do is make the change
and click "OK". That's it, all done!

It'd take a lot of time to fix my library one book at a time, though. Thankfully, calibre
allows bulk editing. Next I'll fix the books I have by Terry Pratchett.
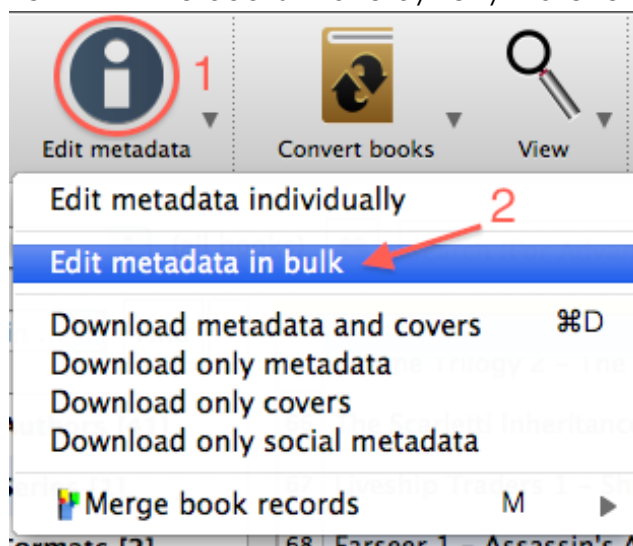
I select the books, and then click on the 'I ' and then on "Edit metadata in bulk".
Here's the window I get:
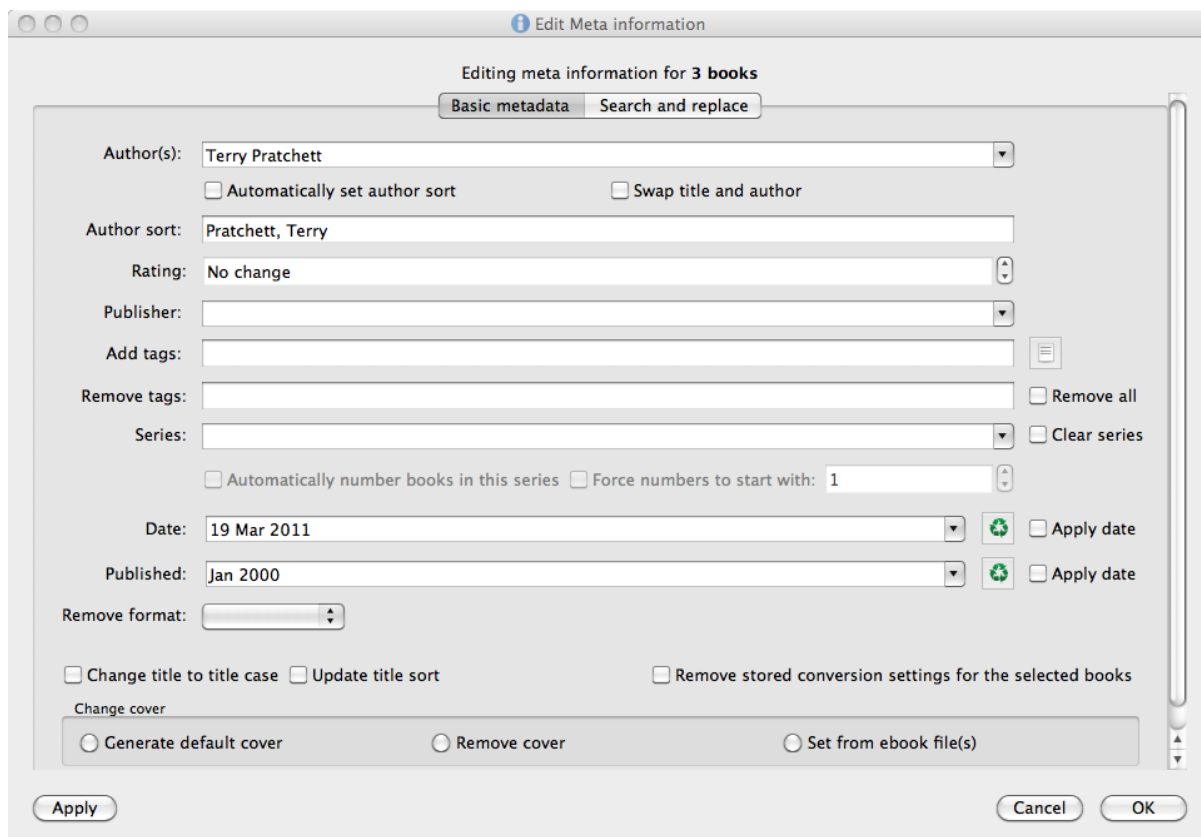
Again I just make the changes I need and then click "OK". I've just fixed the naming issue for another 3 books. Quick and simple, right?

How To Convert eBooks

Converting eBooks is another one of those processes that sounds a lot more complicated than it really is.

Say I've got Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* in the EPUB format, but I want to convert it to a file that can be read on a Kindle. I'll click on the 'Convert Books' Icon (the book with arrows on it), then click on 'Convert individually' as below:
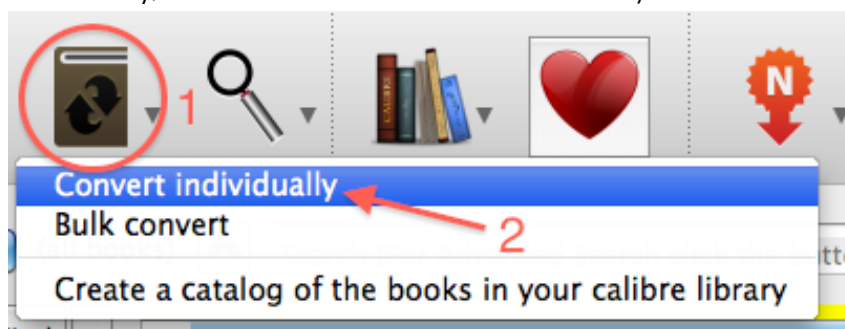

Once I've done that I'll see this window:
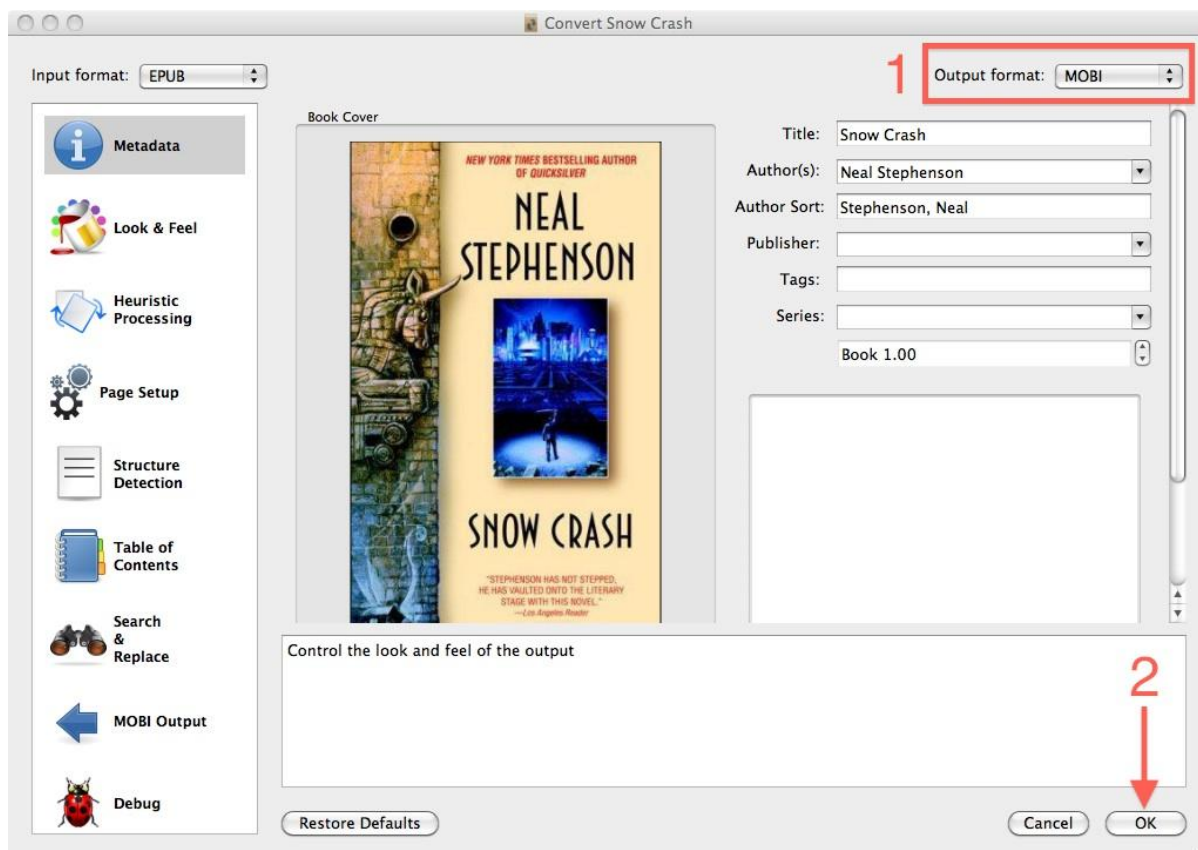
I don't need to touch the input format as that's already been selected for me. I know that Kindles can read *.mobi* files, so I'll choose that as my output format. This window gives me the opportunity to change any metadata as I go, but I have it how I want it. All I need to do is click "OK", and off it goes! Any jobs that are in process or queued are shown in the bottom right hand corner of the screen, with a spinning wheel to signify that a job is in process.

When the job is finished, you may be a bit confused to find that there doesn't seem to be any indication that there is a converted

version of the book. It has been done, though – this is what I see if I click on the *Snow Crash* entry in the library:
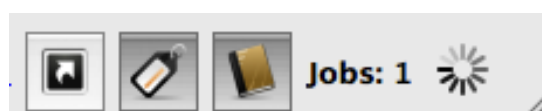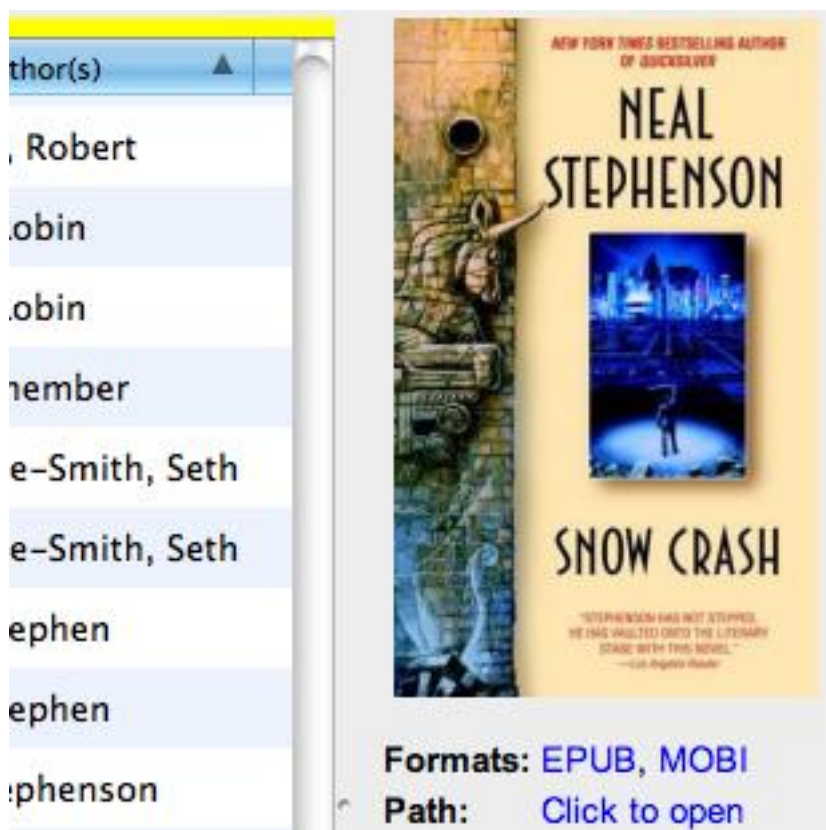
You'll notice that under formats it shows that both EPUB and MOBI formats are available. Clicking on each one opens up the appropriate version in the built in reader. Clicking where it says "Click to open" will open the folder that contains the eBook files – both the EPUB and MOBI files are kept in the same place.

How To Sync To Your Device

Syncing books to your device is quick and painless – just plug your device in while calibre is running and it will detect that it has been connected.
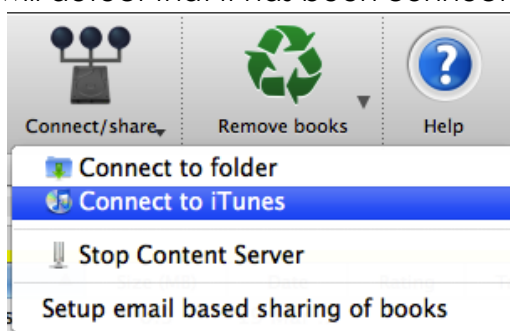

If you're using an Apple device such as an iPhone, an iPod Touch or an iPad the process is a little different – in this case iTunes acts as the 'device'. You send eBooks to iTunes and then use iTunes to sync the eBooks to iBooks on your Apple device. Similarly, if you can't get the device to sync with calibre properly and it has a memory card, you can connect the memory card to the computer and connect to its folder with calibre.

Once you've connected your device (real or otherwise), the interface will change:
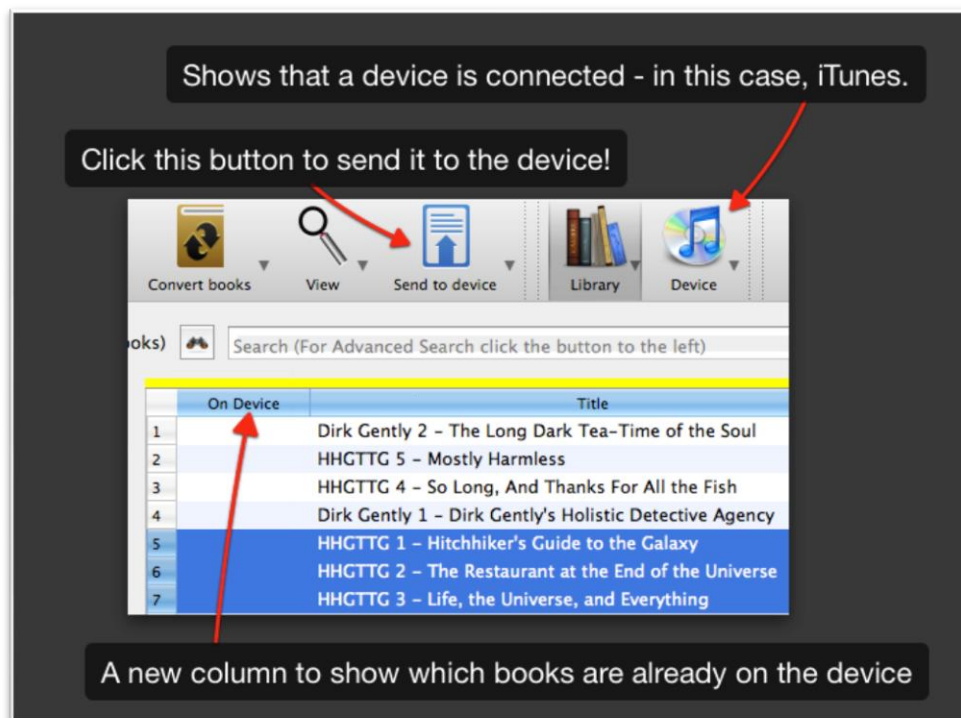
Moving books onto the device is as simple as selecting the books you want to sync and clicking on "Send to device". That's all there is to it.

When you sync books to iTunes they show up under the books tab in the library with all the metadata transferred. They look like this:
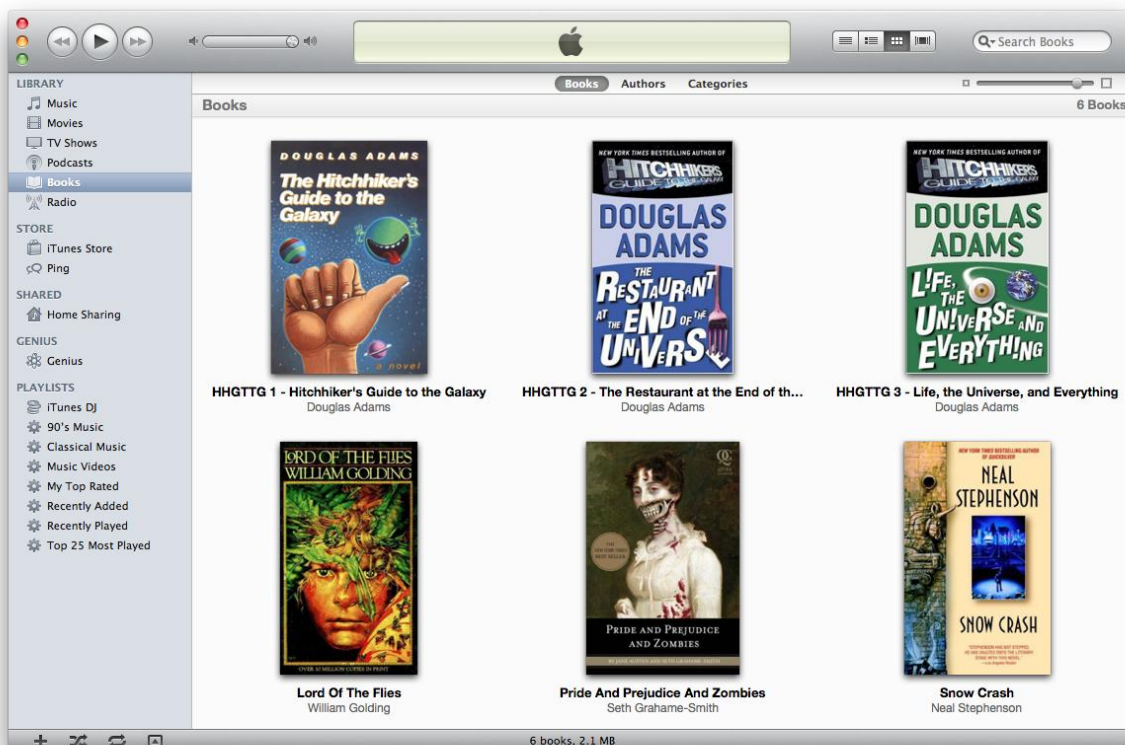
After that it's just a matter of syncing your iDevice to iTunes and you're done.

How To Download News In eBook Form

Downloading the news is just as simple as pretty much anything else in calibre – it's just one button click away. In this case, it's the news button.

When you click the button a new window comes up with a comprehensive list of popular news sources, organised by language and country. When you select a particular source you are able to schedule it to download as well as choose the schedule options.

Repeat this until you've selected all your sources, then click on 'Save'. This will schedule all the sources to be downloaded at their specified times. Alternatively, you can manually download any source individually by selecting it and clicking 'Download now' or all of them at the same time by clicking 'Download all scheduled'.
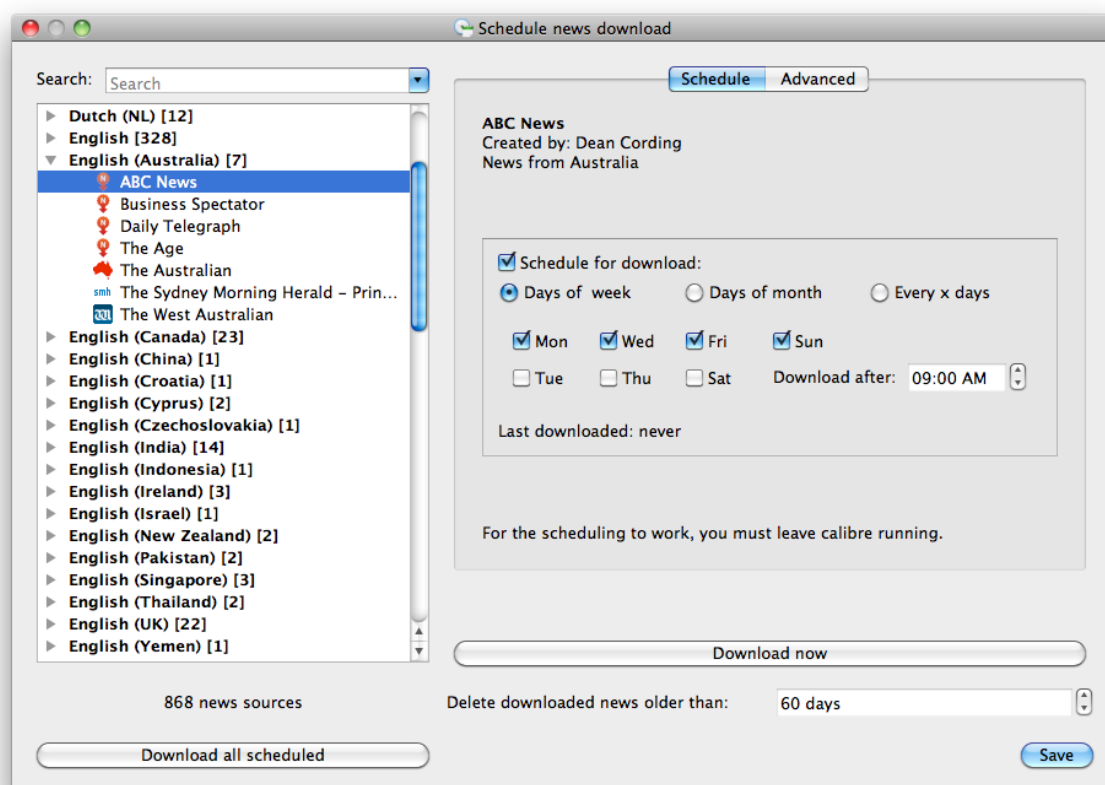
When all is said and done the finished eBook will look something like this:
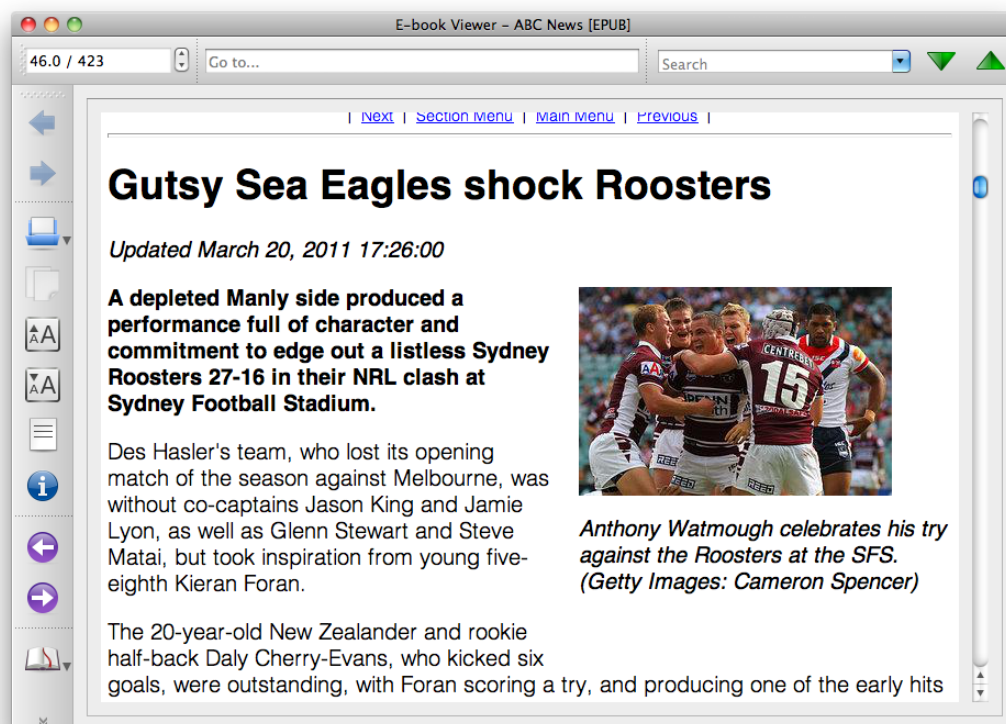
How To Connect To Your Library Without Wires

Remember calibre's content server? That's what we can use to download books to wireless devices.

First you need to make sure that the content server is switched on. You can do that by clicking on the "Connect/share" button – there'll be an option to either start or stop the content server. If it says "start", click it to start it. If it says "stop" then the content server is running and you're good to go!

What does this mean? Well, if you find your computer's local IP address you can type http://your-ip-here:8080 into your device's browser and you'll see something like this:
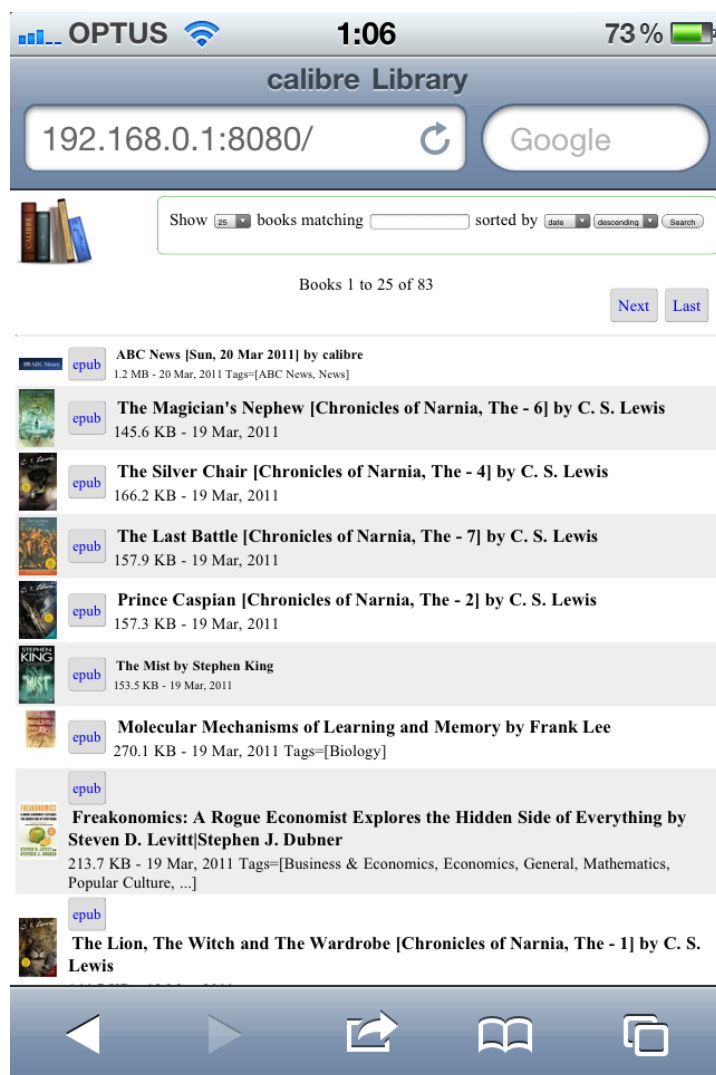
If you're on an iPhone, iPod Touch or iPad you can tap 'epub' on any of those books and it will open it in iBooks. Any other device will open the book in its default eBook application.

Advanced Tips

Dropbox Kludge

Dropbox is an amazing app that we've covered many times on the main site, and even offer an unofficial manual for. One blog post, written by Justin, shows how to combine Dropbox and calibre for universal access to all your eBooks. Check it out here!

Stanza

Stanza is a brilliant app for the iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad which makes it really simple to get and read eBooks. As well as providing access to Project Gutenburg and a number of eBook stores, Stanza also links well with calibre to give you easy access to your eBook library without plugging your device in.
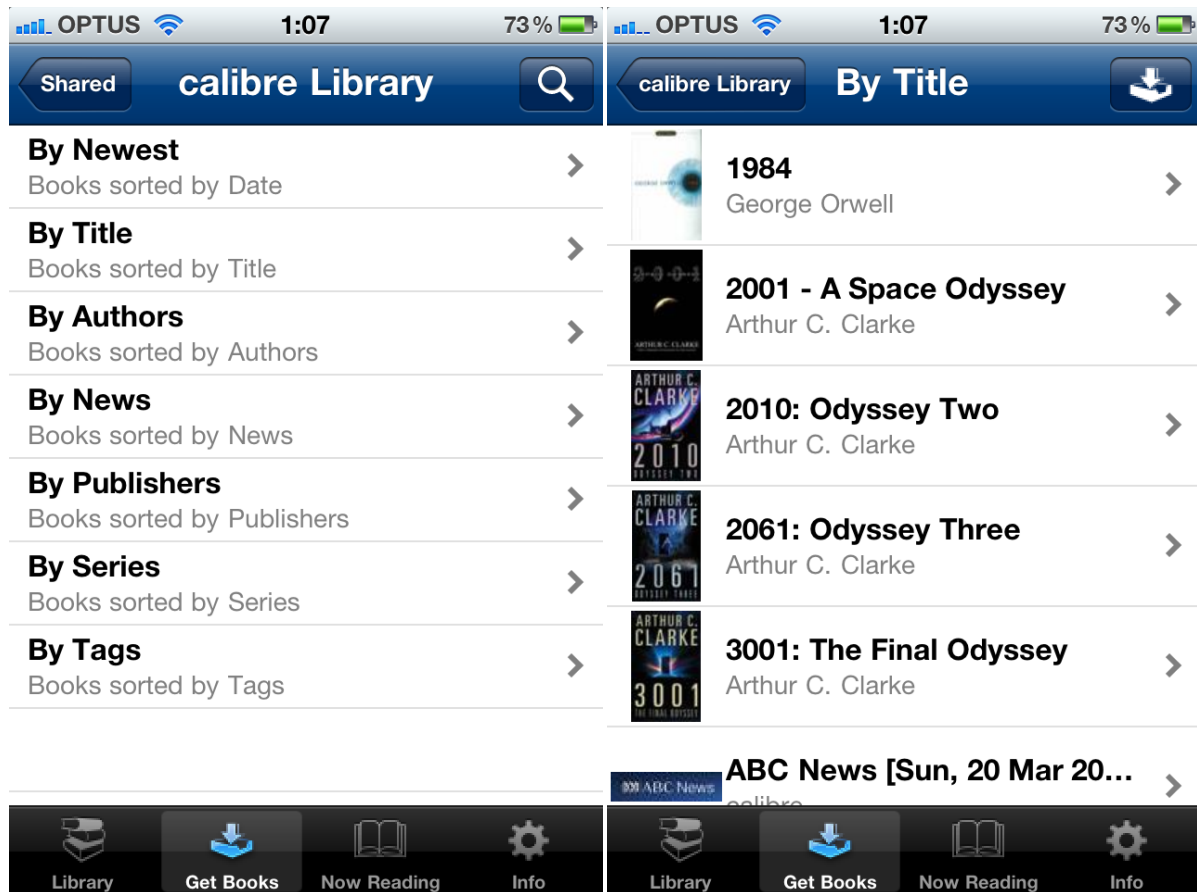
All you need to do is connect your device to the same network as the computer running calibre. Going to the 'Get Books' tab should detect your library automatically, otherwise you can enter in the same address as you would to access it via your device's browser.

Once you're connected you'll see the following interface. Just tap on a book and you can download it straight to your device and start reading.

DRM Removal

While DRM is there to prevent piracy, it also makes it difficult for people who want to do the right thing and buy a book but who feel that they shouldn't have to buy the exact same thing twice to use it in an ever so slightly different format.

With that in mind there are some things that can be done to remove the DRM and to turn the files into normal eBooks that can then be imported into calibre and converted to whatever format is needed.

Be warned, though, that this isn't simple, and does require knowledge of how to use the terminal or command line.

Kindle DRM

This requires that you own a Kindle and that you have bought an eBook from the Kindle store.

You'll also need to install python on your system and download a set of scripts called MobiDeDRM. You'll want to install the **32-bit** version of Python 2.7 for your platform. MobiDeDRM contains 4 scripts: mobidedrm.py, mobidedrm2.py, kindlepid.py and mobihuff.py. You'll be using only the first 3 of those scripts.

Once you've done that you can get to work. On the Kindle where you just bought the book you'll need to go to the Settings menu and type '411' on the keypad. This will bring up an information dialog – you'll need the Kindle's serial, which is a 16-character string of letters and numbers. Save this for later.

Now open up a terminal or command line window and run the following command:
```
python kindlepid.py XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
```

You'll need to replace the Xs with that 16-character serial you got earlier. This will show your Kindle's 10-character PID, which is the code needed to remove the DRM on the eBook.

Next you'll be using mobidedrm.py and the 10-character PID you generated in the last step to remove the DRM from the AZW file.

```
python mobidedrm.py book-title.azw book-title.mobi <PID code>
```

If all is well you'll see the following message:

```
Decrypting. Please wait... done.
```

The result will be a .mobi file with the same name as the kindle book that you can then add to your calibre library and convert to whatever format you like.

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PDF Guides: http://www.makeuseof.com/pages/
Tech Deals: http://www.makeuseof.com/pages/hot-tech-deals

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