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The "New" Out-of-Print Marketplace

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The “New” Out-of-Print Marketplace

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In 1994, my husband and I attended the Out-of-Print Book Seminar, a four day intensive course for those interested in entering the out-of-print book business held at Colorado College in Colorado Springs and led by then editor of *AB Bookman’s Weekly*, Jacob Chernosky. Since this introduction to the world of out-of-print books I have seen the business shift from its years-old traditions of “want lists” and postcards to its present dot.com model where titles are easily searched and acquired online at prices that have gotten lower and lower. In my article for this special issue of *Against the Grain* on out-of-print materials, I give a quick overview of the challenges librarians face in the new out-of-print marketplace and a short glossary of terms to get you started.

As the wife of an out-of-print bookseller, I have drawn upon my husband’s experience in this evolving business and have coerced him to give us an insider’s view of what it’s all about. Peter Tafuri, owner of Frost Pocket Farm books, will teach us what it takes to be an Internet based out-of-print bookseller in today’s OP marketplace, in case you are inclined to give up your day job.

Richard Weatherford was there when the revolution of bringing the OP book business onto the “Information Superhighway” began. In fact, he was one of those leading the charge, first as president of Interloc and later as founder of Ablibris. Dick takes us back to the “good old days” and gives us a “heads up” on where we’re likely to be going in the future.

Just at a point when many out-of-print/bookstores are closing their doors and going strictly online, David Gray and Malcolm Brantz are finding ways to stretch the shrinking acquisitions dollar, as well as encourage faculty involvement in the acquisitions process, through using independent, wholesale, and mega bookstores for collection development at Marshall University and the Colorado Christian University.

A whole new life is being given many out-of-print books through the use of digital scanning projects now underway. John Riley gives an overview of two ongoing projects. John interviews John Mark Ockerbloom, founder of...
A Good Book is Not that Hard to Find: Librarians and the New Out-of-Print Marketplace

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I was using one of the out-of-print (OP) metasearch engines (AddAll http://www.addall.com/used or Bookfinder http://www.bookfinder.com/) to locate an out-of-print book that had been requested by a faculty member. After a quick online search, I located what I thought was the volume I needed. This was a difficult request as the book I needed was part of a two-volume set. I had been successful in getting volume two, but volume one eluded me.

The online description of the book gave very little information—the condition was listed as “very good,” publisher and year was given, and the book had no “dj” (dust jacket). There was no clue as to whether it was volume one or two though the publication year seemed to indicate that it was volume one. I sent an e-mail message to the OP bookseller asking if the book was the volume I was looking for and awaited a response. A short, to the point, message came back: “Yes. Book is available.”

So, I had our Treasurer’s Office send off a check for $11.00 ($8.00 to cover the cost of the book and $3.00 for shipping and handling) and waited for the book to arrive. This was in the precredit card days and we had no other way to pay for an item. Some out-of-print booksellers would take a purchase order, others demanded “cash upfront.” When the book finally arrived, it was in the condition stated in the online description, but it was not the volume I needed. I asked my acquisitions clerk to follow-up and contact the OP bookseller, explain our situation and return the book for a refund.

A letter was written and the book returned. Some time went by, but we received no response from the OP bookseller. After enough time had elapsed that the book should have been received and a refund issued, I suggested that she might be calling the OP bookseller. She called a couple of times and left messages, but still no answer. Finally, she tried again and got an elderly gentleman on the phone. She explained the problem with the book, the fact that we had returned it, and that we had not received a refund. She told the OP bookseller that we wanted the cost of the book refunded as it did not meet our needs. The OP bookseller, who happened to be in Maine, NY, told my acquisitions clerk that he would have to check with Vito and get back with her—he further informed her that Vito was his dog.

A long while passed after this conversation. Needless to say the $8.00 check did not appear in the mail. A question I asked myself at this point was, for $8.00 should I just chalk this up to experience? Not all online booksellers are created equal and this could just be another online scam. I decided to give it another shot. After all, anyone with a dog can’t be all bad—I have a dog and two cats—and perhaps I could reason with a fellow New Yorker. So I dialled the number and got the OP bookseller on the phone. I started slowly and explained my situation.

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the Online Books Page located at the University of Pennsylvania and now providing links to over 18,000 English language titles. John continues his investigation of digitization projects with a description of the ongoing efforts of the National Yiddish Book Center which is helping to preserve and revitalize out-of-print books that were once thought lost.

Lest you think that books are the only items to fall out of general distribution, Gary Handman at UC Berkeley takes us on a tour of the out-of-distribution (OD) video marketplace to help us locate that long lost copy of "Babes on Broadway.”

Finally, to get an inside track on book bar-