June 2003

A Good Book is Not that Hard to Find: Librarians and the New Out-of-Print Marketplace

Narda Tafuri
University of Scranton, tafurin1@scranton.edu

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4105

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I was using one of the out-of-print (OP) metasearch engines (AddAll at http://www.addall.com/used or Bookfinder at 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 the pre-credit 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, explaining 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 try 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 based in Long Island, NY, told my acquisitions clerk that he would have to check with Vito and get back with her—she further informed her that Vito was her 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 dialed the number and got the OP bookseller on the phone. I started slowly and explained my situation.

The “New Out of Print Marketplace” from page 1

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 revive 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-
Out-of-print booksellers that use Alibris and Abebooks can opt to have their listings loaded onto the Amazon.com and/or Barnes & Noble Websites. However, OP booksellers that do business with Alibris or Abebooks do not have to sell their titles on Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble (BN.com) online. Therefore, there may be more copies of a book available than what you come across on Amazon.com or BN.com. The best way to locate the most available copies of a title is through the metasearch engines mentioned at the beginning of this article: AddAll or Bookfinder. They each cross-search numerous online OP Websites and bring back search results. The results can be sorted by price if that is the primary concern. Some of the sites that they search are international in scope. You can limit by type of binding and a number of other criteria. It’s important to remember that limiting can eliminate possible “hits.” Generally a minimalist search may yield greater results.

Condition of a book is very important. I generally do not choose a book that is below the condition “very good.” Most designated OP bookseller Websites have a “glossary of terms” based on those originally established by AB Bookman’s Weekly. (A brief guide to terms is contained in the endnotes for this article.) It’s a good idea if you are unfamiliar with a term to do a little reading before deciding on which copy will meet your needs. If you have any concerns or questions, the best thing to do is to contact the bookseller directly and ask him/her to be more specific about the condition. For example, “What exactly do you mean by ‘light underlining’?” How many pages are we talking about? How big exactly is the stain on the front cover?” There have been times that I have purchased a book for significantly more money because a cheaper copy’s condition did not meet the standards set by our collection development policy. I have also been willing to spend a bit more for a hardcover version of a book than a paperback one in order to save the binding cost. Make sure you know what the bookseller’s return policy is. If you are dissatisfied with a book, send it back.

What if you and your staff (this is assuming you have any staff in these days of downsizing) don’t have enough hours in the day already to accomplish what you need to do? Well, you have a few different options available to you. You could set up library accounts with Alibris and Abebooks (whose library site is AbeLibrary.com). Both sites will allow you to search, select the books you want, and order them all on one purchase order. You will be sent an invoice or you can use your credit card, the choice is yours. You can also set up “want lists” with either one. Your “wants” are matched against their databases of books and you are sent notification if the titles you need are found. You then have the option of going online and purchasing the titles you want. Your “wants” stay in the online OP systems indefinitely so if a title you need is not currently available you will be notified by e-mail should it be listed by an OP bookseller in the future. Alibris and Abebooks inspect books prior to shipment and allows returns within 30 days if you are dissatisfied for any reason. AbeLibrary allows returns within 14 days of a book’s receipt. However, the buyer is responsible for shipping charges both ways if the book is “as described.” If the book is “not as described,” unreasonably late, or it did not arrive, the bookseller is responsible for all charges.

If that is still too much work for you, some print vendors can also search and acquire out-of-print books on your behalf. Aux Amateurs des Livres, Blackwells Book Service, Casalini, Harrassowitz, Midwest Library Service, as well as others will search for out-of-print copies. However, expect that the cost will be higher than if you had spent the time searching yourself. Try to remember “there’s nothing as good as a free lunch.” You probably will spend 50% or more than if you had searched and acquired the titles yourself.

On occasion, I have also had excellent success locating out-of-print books using a specialist OP bookseller. This works especially well if you are collection building in a particular area. Brian Elliott, Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing at Alibris, recently stated at the 2003 Midwinter meeting of the ALCCTS Out-of-Print Discussion Group that most OP booksellers probably do not have more than 25% of their books online. This means that there is an untapped potential that is not going to be found by searching the various online OP book sites. This is borne out by information that I had gathered for an ALA Poster Session I presented in June 2001 entitled “The Search is Over! Locating Out-of-Print Books Online and Offline.” I compared the results I achieved by purchasing 40 titles using an OP specialist bookseller to the cost and availability of the same titles if purchased through various OP Websites. The OP specialist bookseller was able to locate four titles that were not available on any of the online OP book services.

In most cases the amount charged by the bookseller was either the same or less than the average cost of a particular title located through using the Bookfinder metasearch engine for 50% (18) of the 36 titles located by both. By using a book vendor or an OP bookseller, you can set price limits or ask for price quotes, set condition limits, and let them do the work. You also avoid having to ask “Vito” for a refund if you need to return an item. Will you get the OP book at the cheapest price possible? No, however, sometimes purchasing books this way is cost effective because it saves you and your staff time.

As regards price, the average cost of the 40 titles searched for this study was $32.75. This is a decrease of approximately 35% from the average price I had determined in a previous article I wrote for the February 1998 issue of ATG entitled “The Out-of-Print Marketplace.” I had stated in that article, “The average cost of an out-of-print book ranges from $45 to $50.” The decrease in the cost of OP books in general is due to the proliferation of online OP Websites and online OP booksellers. This proliferation has brought about its own set of problems. Personal experiences (and my husband’s disparaging remarks as he marks down his stock) indicate that prices for more common titles have continued on page 22
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dropped drastically. However, at the same time the prices on more collectible titles have actually experienced a dramatic rise. (It is quite unfortunate that my husband doesn’t seem to own any of those titles.)

I have found OP specialist booksellers through the old “trail and error” method of searching for books in particular subject areas and noticing when a dealer’s name seems to appear with a great deal of frequency, comparing that dealer’s prices with other dealers to make sure that they aren’t overinflated and then doing some business with them to see how things transpire. You could also “Browse” books by subject category on Abebooks or Alibris and check out which dealers’ names keep reappearing in your subject area. You can also check out the dealer descriptions in the Book Wire Index of Antiquarian Booksellers (http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/booksellers/antiquarian-booksellers.html) or visit the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) (http://www.abaa.org) or International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) (http://www.ilab-ilta.com) Websites for listings of members and their specialties. Another helpful site is Deanna Ramsay’s Website Littera Scripta (http://www.litterascripta.com) which provides resources for readers, rare book collectors and used booksellers. (Check out my interview with Deanna Ramsay in this issue of ATG.)

Let’s return back to the tale of poor Vito the Dog because his story has one final point to make. As you recall, I was trying to locate a particular volume of a two-volume set. I had looked everywhere I possibly could and was not able to find it. And that’s the final point. Even with millions of OP books available online and more being added every day, automated want lists, and armies of OP booksellers, not every OP book you need is going to be available. This is difficult to explain to folks who feel that just “everything” is available on the Internet. But it’s not. There are many OP books that will never be available for purchase.

The new out-of-print marketplace certainly has a lot more to offer librarians than was available in the past. The choice of options for locating and purchasing OP books seems to be growing every day. No longer can it be said that a good book is hard to find!

A Short Glossary of Out-of-Print Book Terms and Abbreviations

4to, 8vo, 12mo, etc.: refers to the size of the book. This is based on the number of pages that a single printed sheet has been folded in the production of a book. Fewer folds mean a larger book. Most hardbound books are 8vo.

aeg: all edges gilt

As New: see Condition

bdg: binding

bds: abbreviation for boards, the stiff front and back parts of hardcover books.

BOMC: Book of the Month Club

Brodart: plastic cover which is used to protect a book’s dust jacket.

bumped: dented; this usually occurs on a book’s edges and corners due to use.

damaged: small tears, or small pieces missing from the edges of pages or dust jacket.

cocked: the spine is twisted so that the boards will not line up evenly with each other.

covered: following are standard bookseller terms generally used to describe the following condition of a book. These terms are those as stated in the AB Bookman’s Weekly. Abbreviations for these terms are:

NF—Near Fine; G—Good; F—Fine; VG—Very Good; P—Poor; Fair—Fair; As New—As New.

When two abbreviations or terms of condition are used together with a slash, the first term generally refers to the condition of the book, the second term generally refers to the condition of the dust jacket, i.e.: VG/VG means that the book is in Very Good condition and the dust jacket is also in Very Good condition.

As New: to be used only when the book is in the same immaculate condition in which it was published. There can be no defects, no missing pages, no library stamps, etc., and the dust jacket (if it was issued with one) must be perfect, without any tears.

Fine: approaches the condition of As New, but without being crisp. For the purpose of the Term Fine there must also be no defects, etc., and if the jacket has a hint of tear, or other defect, or looks worn, this should not be noted.

Very Good: can describe a used book that does show some small signs of wear — but no tears — on either binding or paper. Any defects must be noted.

Good: describes the average used and worn book that has all pages or leaves present. Any defects must be noted.

Fair: is a worn book that has complete text pages (including those with maps or plates) but may lack endpapers, half-title, etc. (which must be noted). Binding, jacket (if any), etc., may also be worn. All defects must be noted.

Poor: describes a book that is sufficiently worn that its only merit is as a reading copy because it does have the complete text, which must be legible. Any missing maps or plates should still be noted. This copy may be soiled, scuffed, stained or spotted and may have loose joints, hinges, pages, etc.

DJ or DW: abbreviation for dust jacket or dust wrapper dust jacket; also called dust wrapper; the paper cover, usually illustrated, placed around a book to protect its binding.

ep: abbreviation for endpapers; these are the sheets of papers pasted onto the inside covers joining the text blocks to the cover. One side is pasted down onto the cover, the other is left free.

exlib or ex-lib: a book that has been purchased from a library and will therefore have library stamp marks, pockets, due date slips, etc.

F: fine; see Condition

Fair: see Condition

FFEP: front free endpaper (the blank sheet that is not pasted down onto the cover).

Fine: see Condition

first edition: the first printing of the first edition; the first time a book has appeared.

fixed: yellowing spotting of paper usually due to acid content.

G: good; see Condition

Good: see Condition

half leather: the spine and the corners of the book have been bound in leather, while the rest of the cover is in cloth or paper.

hinge: the joint (either outer or inner) of the binding of a book (the part that bends when the book is opened).

ill.: Illustrated or illustrations

inscribed: see Condition

laid in: a piece of paper, leaf, letter, etc., inserted but not glued into a book.

limited edition: see Condition

ms or mss: manuscript

nd: no date

NF: near fine; see Condition

Near Fine: see Condition

P: Poor; see Condition

PB or Pbk: see Condition

d:Laid in: a piece of paper, leaf, letter, etc., inserted but not glued into a book.

dated: see Condition

laid in: a piece of paper, leaf, letter, etc., inserted but not glued into a book.

rubbed: indicates that the outer layer of the binding material has been rubbed off.

shaken: book is no longer firm and crisp; textblock feels loose in the hinges.

signed: inscribed with the author’s signature.

slips: a container (usually cardboard) specially made to hold a book.

spine: the bound outer edge of a book.

tpeed: top edge gilt

tipped in: a sheet or sheets added after the book was produced through the use of minute amounts of glue along the edges of the sheets(s) to be inserted.

tp: title page

uncut: older books did not have their edges trimmed and are thus described as “uncut.”

VG: very good; see Condition

Very Good: see Condition

vol.: volume