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ATG Interviews Deanna Ramsay

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- Because if we give our patrons carte blanche to order whatever they want, one patron (or a few patrons) might hog all the resources and not leave enough for the others. That's another problem we have already. However, the solution is simple: just because we show our patrons the universe of information and ask them to select for themselves does not mean that we give them carte blanche to order whatever they want. We still have limited budgets. It just means that we expand the universe of options from which they may select, using a limited budget. Our message changes from "Here are the things we've selected for you" to "Here's everything that's available. We can't afford everything, so what would you like?" Yes, some may overeat, leaving others hungry. But how is that different from the current situation, in which aggressive patrons can already submit more than their share of order requests? The solution remains the same: responsible allocation of the limited resources by library professionals.
- Because our patrons don't have time to be library selectors. They have their own jobs; they're paying us to find the good stuff. Under the model I'm suggesting, though, "library selection" would take no more time than the research we already expect our patrons to do. The difference, from their perspective, would only be that their options are much greater. When they look something up and find something that looks good, they would have the option of saying "Buy this," and having an electronic copy delivered to them; under the current model of collection building, they would have gone looking for that thing and not found it, because we hadn't anticipated that they would want it.

How serious is this suggestion? Admittedly, it's only a set of preliminary thoughts and it ignores a whole host of practical issues. For example, what does it mean to "show patrons everything that is available," and how could it be done in a coherent way? But what if we took the fundamental idea seriously and started actually working towards a reality that offers our patrons everything instead of offering them only a tiny subset of what's actually available? What if we worked from a "Yes, of course you can have it" assumption instead of a "Wait, let's see whether I thought you were going to want it" assumption?

In short, what if we allowed our users' needs and the changing reality of the information environment to shape our practices, instead of trying to shape our users' behavior to the practices we are comfortable with?

ATG Interviews Deanna Ramsay

Bookseller <Deanna@ramsaybooks.com>

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Column Editors Note: Deanna Ramsay has been an out-of-print bookseller in Aurora, Ontario, Canada, since 1987. She started out selling used books in a retail shop called *Starlight Books* which she sold in 1992 and now sells exclusively online. Deanna is the Webmaster for IOBA, the Independent Out-of-Print Booksellers Association, Webmaster of *Littera Scripta*, (<http://www.litterascripta.com/>) a Website providing resources for readers, rare book collections and used booksellers, as well as a manager of email lists and designer of Websites for other booksellers.

I interviewed Deanna recently to help give librarians the "skinny" on the Canadian out-of-print book scene. The following are her responses.

(For more information on Deanna, visit her Website at: <http://www.ramsaybooks.com> or contact her by email at: <Deanna@ramsaybooks.com>). — NT

ATG: Deanna, you've been selling used and out-of-print books now for 16 years, how did you get "into" the business? Did you have any formal training, etc.?

DR: One day I discovered that my favourite used bookstore was for sale. The owner was moving to the west coast. I impulsively decided to buy it. I had no experience in the book business, nor in retail. I borrowed money from my family and from the bank and plunged in. I wince a bit when I think of just how little I knew when I started.

ATG: You started out with an open shop and then decided to sell exclusively online. What led you to that decision? Do you see this as being a trend in the OP book business?

DR: Well, I didn't go directly from an open shop to selling online. I was a single mother with a young daughter, two dogs, a cat, and two horses at home, and a retail business. Initially I tried to do all the work myself, and didn't hire any part-time help until the third year (I was in my 20's when I did this and still thought I was immortal). To be quite honest, I got very, very tired. After five years, in 1992, I put the store up for sale with no real idea of what I would do afterwards. As luck would have it, I had three different prospective buyers interested, so I had no trouble selling it. I've since realized that selling a business is not usually that easy.

From the proceeds of the sale, I bought my first computer. I did some book scouting [book scouting is the process of searching and purchasing books on behalf of out-of-print booksellers; an individual involved in this activity is therefore called a *book scout*] for other booksellers, while reading as many books on the book trade as I could get my hands on. I think I learned as much during that year or so of reading as I had in the previous five years of running a retail store.

For a while, I sold books on *Interloc*, which was a closed computer network that matched wants and books for sale. In 1993, I discovered the

Internet and started selling books (from my book scouting) on rec.arts.books.marketplace which is a newsgroup. Then I found the *Bibliophile* mailing list. I'd been on *Bibliophile* for a while when Cathy Waters of *Timeless Books* in Victoria, BC, announced that her husband Keith and his friend Rick Pura were starting an online database called the *Advanced Book Exchange*. So I was one of the first booksellers to sign up for that.

I do think that there has been a trend in the trade towards strictly online businesses. But lately I've also heard about some people going the other direction - from online to open store. I believe that the most successful booksellers online are actually those who have moved from mail order catalogue businesses to the Internet. Most still produce catalogues. Essentially it's the same business, but with online catalogues rather than paper.

ATG: How many books do you have and how do you store them? Why do you think it is that used/out-of-print booksellers never seem to have enough books?

DR: I have about 5,500 books listed online, and perhaps another 7,000-8,000 stored in boxes. I renovated my garage, which is about 450 square feet. So all of the listed books are on shelves, and are alphabetical by author. Because I don't have a walk-in trade, I don't bother to separate them into subject categories for the most part. There are just four categories, mostly dictated by size so that I can use different shelf sizes for efficiency - hardcovers, mass market paperbacks, oversize books, and a separate section for books on horses (my specialty).

Most booksellers enjoy buying books much more than they enjoy selling books. Buying is a treasure hunt, and it's fun. Selling books is work — quite hard work sometimes. I suspect that many booksellers are just collectors whose buying habits have gotten completely out of control, and need to finance their habit.

ATG: What do you see as some of the greatest changes in the used/out-of-print book business since you started? What changes in the Canadian OP book market have you seen over the last five years?

DR: I guess that I've changed my own methods over time that I don't always see changes in the marketplace so clearly. But overall, I've seen prices decline slightly. There are many more small part-time booksellers now with the databases (*ABE*, *Alibris*, *Choosebooks*, etc.) making it an easy business to get into on a part-time basis. The problem is that it's become a much more difficult business to make a living from. The biggest change that I've seen is in the availability of books. It was much easier to find quality out-of-print titles a few years ago. There are

continued on page 50

so many small dealers, book scouts, and e-Bay sellers scouring the library sales, estate sales, etc. that it's become quite difficult to find enough decent stock to make it worth your time on a bookbuying trip. I find that I'm paying more for good books, and finding fewer of them.

ATG: *Where do you get your used/out-of-print books and are there any special challenges in finding OP books in Canada?*

DR: These days, since I've stopped buying outside of my specialty, I usually buy from other dealers. I don't think that the Canadian market is much different than the American market really. Prices actually tend to be a bit lower in Canada than the U.S., depending on what region you're in, and what the exchange rate is. I expect that the biggest challenge in Canada would be the distances you have to travel. I'm in one of the most heavily populated areas, so it's not such a concern here unless you want to buy or sell at book fairs (I don't). From most of our cities, it's closer to drive to a U.S. city than to another Canadian city.

ATG: *What do you consider to be the best Canadian sources for OP books online?*

DR: There are very few borders in the OP trade these days. **ABE** is a Canadian company, but has booksellers from around the world. I would think that the percentage of Canadian sellers on **ABE** is not much different than the percentage on **Choosebooks** (a U.S. database). The only truly Canadian online source that I can think of is the **BooksCanada** mailing list, which I run. You can subscribe to it for free at <http://www.ramsaybooks.com/booksCanada/>.

ATG: *Are there any used/out-of-print book stores in Toronto that librarians should consider visiting while attending the American Library Association Conference?*

DR: Toronto has some wonderful stores. Depending on your interests, try these:

Steven Temple Books, 489 Queen Street West — Wonderful stock of Canadian literature, among other things. Steven is tremendously knowledgeable (also a bit of a character depending on the mood you catch him in).

D. & E. Lake, 237 King Street East - For some truly rare items. Lake has handled some of the very best (and most expensive) items ever seen in this country.

Hugh Anson-Cartwright, 229 College Street - One of the very best known Canadian booksellers. Hugh is a gentleman, and has a great stock of Canadiana.

Jamie Fraser Books, 427A Queen Street West - Has some wonderful pulps and paperbacks. Particularly Science Fiction and Mystery.

Abelard Books, 519 Queen Street West - Philosophy, Theology.

Acadia Books, 232 Queen Street West - Art

David Mason Books, 342 Queen Street West

McBurnie & Cutler, 698 Queen Street West

Joseph Patrick Books, by appointment (416) 766-3357 - Canadiana

There are lots of others as well. Toronto has an overabundance of great bookstores. Most of them will carry a used bookstore guide to the city which includes a map.

ATG: *What are some important factors librarians should consider when buying used/out-of-print books online? Are there any special considerations when buying books from Canadian used/out-of-print booksellers?*

DR: This really is the same market it's always been. It's just larger, faster moving, and as a consequence, sometimes less organized. You still get what you pay for. It's much easier to compare by price than by quality, so it's easier to find yourself with an inexpensive but shabby purchase. There are sellers out there who do not know the difference between a first edition, a second printing, and a facsimile reprint - as there have always been. There are even sellers who will sell books that are missing pages (because they don't collate), or have major damage that isn't noted - though this is less common than edition errors. So while you certainly should look for the best price, be sure to read descriptions carefully. Pay attention to the sellers. Read the terms of sale. Most reputable booksellers with experience will ship with an invoice to libraries. All should offer a generous return policy. Look for affiliations (**ABAC**, **ABAA**, **ABA**, **ILAB**, **IOBA**). All of them require that book-

sellers operate their businesses ethically. Most require that booksellers demonstrate or acquire a particular level of knowledge. However, don't be turned off if a bookseller is not affiliated. It's just one clue to the level of service they offer.

ATG: *What suggestions, advice, etc. would you give to someone wanting to get into the out-of-print book business today?*

DR: Educate yourself. Find a mentor who is willing to teach you (and find a way to make it worthwhile for them). The traditional method of getting into this trade is to apprentice with an experienced and knowledgeable bookseller. Read books on the subject. Join mailing lists. A good starting place might be to join the **Bibliophile** mailing list <http://www.bibliophilegroup.com/>.

Many of the sellers coming into the business today don't have any background in the trade. I didn't have any myself when I started. I didn't even understand how much there was to know until I took that year off and started reading. The OP trade has a long history, and it's more than just a retail business. The very best booksellers in the trade are scholars first, and retailers second. There is a tendency to write this off to "elitism." But that's not fair to those people who have spent lifetimes accumulating knowledge. It's an easy business to do badly, and a very difficult business to do well.

ATG Interviews Joe Lee

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A Word from the Underdog, or How I Created my Own Small Press

Column Editor's Note: *As chair of the Mississippi Library Association's Author Awards Committee, I heard from Joe Lee when his book was nominated for the award in fiction. We got to talking about how it was published and the world of small presses, and I thought this would make a good article for ATG. Here is a chance to hear from an author who made the decision to go it alone in the publishing world. — APM*

ATG: *How did you get the idea for your novel?*

JL: I began writing the original draft of *On The Record* in early 1997. The story was loosely based on my wife's duties as Consumer Protection Director under **Mike Moore** (Mississippi Attorney General). It's a work of fiction, since I have a corrupt Attorney General and a series of corrupt and influential people who greatly shape the plot.

ATG: *How did you get started trying to have your book published? Describe the process.*

JL: I have a background in radio, television and journalism, and I worked full-time in television through the end of 1999, so it was 2000 before I devoted full attention to the novel. I worked with an editor in Dallas that year, and I began looking for an agent and/or publisher in early 2001. I contacted literary agents with a proposal, which included a synopsis, cover letter and brief personal biography. Most of the agents were in New York City, although a few were sprinkled in different parts of the country. I wrote to between 75-100 in the first few months of 2001, and during this time I was also contacting small publishing houses in this part of the country. While all the agents ultimately said no, most (75% or more) turned me down because of full client lists. A considerable number were very encouraging, however, telling me that I was likely to find an agent. Of the smaller publishers, I was told by all that my subject matter either didn't fit their niche (i.e., cookbooks, children's books, etc.) or that a larger, mainstream publisher would likely do more justice to my novel than they could.

continued on page 51