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Back Talk--Following Ulysses on (the) Amazon

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Back Talk — Following Ulysses on (the) Amazon

Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

This is a sobering moral tale about what becomes of the printed book in today's marketplace. The print book, I tell my faculty and administration, has a long and glorious history in front of it yet, but just at the moment some of its friends aren't helping much.

When I left home for college on a red-eye flight long ago, I took a suitcase and a **Smith-Corona** portable typewriter and in the typewriter case a single book — the sort of book "college men" would read, I was sure. It was a brand new copy of the old Vintage paperback of the 1934 edition of **Joyce's Ulysses**. It kept me company through college and indeed keeps me company still, though that copy has never actually been read. I got a couple of chapters through several times and then drifted off. When I finally read it the first time, I'd been studying in Dublin for a year and bought a perfectly lovely small trim-size hardback copy published by the **Bodley Head** and read it in a week, while going out and jumping on city busses to track down the locations of every chapter. That copy I've read several times since, always with great enthusiasm.

So what if a young person today needed a copy of *Ulysses*, I asked myself some weeks ago. What's available? Time to check **Amazon**.

Bad news.

Let's stipulate that we want a well-made and serviceable paperback book, sturdy enough to last through a serious reading of 800 or so pages, well-printed, in an edition that you can be sure has something to do with what **Mr. Joyce** wrote. Simple enough?

No. Try the **Amazon** search yourself. There are three main versions of the text, to start with. One is the long-standard British and American edition that was my Vintage paperback. That text stabilized in the early 1930s after the first printings were corrected and the publishing situation mostly regularized; there's a later edition

from the 1980s by a German scholar who did an elaborate critical edition to clean up the inconsistencies of the earlier editions; and as it happens now you can buy reprints of the 1922 original printing, full of misprints, as well.

The copyright situation, you see, is messy and contested. It's pretty certain (I am not a lawyer) that the 1922 text is out of copyright; it's pretty certain that the 1980s critical edition is in copyright; and the status of the 1930s edition is tangled in different national copyright laws and haunted by the **Joyce** estate, which has been notoriously protective of its rights in every way.

Still, it used to be easy to buy this book. It's always been in print, the supply chain was always full of copies, it was assigned reading in hundreds if not thousands of university courses. There's every reason for this book to be a business success, and we should all benefit from that.

Well, try that **Amazon** search, ok? You'll get dozens of pages of hits, but what you find is a vast mishmash of dumped-to-digital e-books of dubious provenance, dumped-to-POD p-books equally dubious, and secondhand copies of editions you half-recognize but can't be sure what condition they're in. When I first did the experiment, I gave up, partly because I don't actually need a copy right now, but also because I genuinely could not find one that met my relatively simple criteria — new, well-made, dependable edition. (Print on Demand books are particularly insidious today, cheaply made and variously unsatisfactory. Even staid **Oxford University Press** for almost ten years has been doing POD to keep some classic scholarly titles "in print," but the objects they sell now are barely serviceable and to my eye downright ugly, a conscious betrayal of half a millennium of serious book-making.)

Amazon contributes to this problem in two ways. First, many of the trashware editions are in fact

published and distributed by **Amazon's** own "self-publishing" print and digital services. But worse is **Amazon's** relentless failure to pay heed to metadata. You can't tell what version you're looking at.

When you find a given title on **Amazon**, it generally lets you choose among **Kindle**, hardcover, paperback, and sometimes audiobook versions of the same book. When it's a new commercial product from a single publisher, that works well. Time after time on the *Ulysses* pages, you will be given that choice, but the three or four versions whose tabs appear on the same screen turn out, when you click on a tab, to be *completely* different editions. What looked like a possible contender for the paperback choice offered a "hardcover" tab that linked to an out-of-print edition by a completely different publisher.

So then I went back a day later, had the same result, and got in touch with **Amazon** for some help. There's a click-here-and-we'll-call-you help service that I tried first. The **Amazon** representative there failed completely. He had clearly never heard of **Joyce** or *Ulysses* and could not find any copy for sale at all on the Website.

So then I wrote in to their email customer service and received back a note encouraging me to purchase this volume: http://www.amazon.com/Ulysses-James-Joyce/dp/1494405490/ref=sr_1_1?s=instant-video&ie=UTF8&qid=1442585290&sr=8-1&keywords=paperback+for+Ulysses This is a dump-to-POD edition distributed by **Amazon's** own self-publishing arm. It's the most remarkable copy of *Ulysses* I've ever seen, since it fits the whole book into 228 pages, trim size 8.5x11, formatted with two columns of 56 lines each per page, each line averaging ten or so words. I've not seen the physical object and can't be sure, but the type face must be 10 point or more likely smaller. My eyes hurt just thinking about it.

So I squawked again and got one more message from the email customer service, saying that no reputable publisher now offers *Ulysses* through **Amazon**. This is unlikely to be true, but it is what **Amazon's** representative says. This customer service representative again seemed to have no idea who **Joyce** is, what the book is, or why someone would care. When I had said "most famous and important novel of the twentieth century" he reacted not at all. He invited me to submit a product request online.

I persisted. I got **Amazon** to make another try to find a good new paperback copy of *Ulysses* for me. What they came up with this time was a **Wordsworth** edition from the UK for \$1.45. This has the merit of coming from a somewhat serious publisher, producing inexpensive copies of out-of-copyright classics. Reader, I bought it — don't actually need it, but for \$1.45 (and free shipping with Prime), I couldn't resist. It's not bad at all. It does the job. Coming from a corporate publisher, it's probably even copyright-legal.



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Of course, I'll think a little about just how it makes sense to sell a book at that price at all and where the concept of profit has gone. Which part of the \$1.45 pays for the printing and binding, which for the distribution to booksellers, and which part for the shipping to me? It's a good choice for a professor to assign her students in a world of overpriced textbooks.

While I waited for that to arrive, I happened to walk past a bookstore. You remember bookstores. They're easy to spot: big sign "Books" outside and lots of greeting cards, wrapping paper, and writers' supplies inside. But behind them, actual books. It took me thirty seconds in the store to find what I was looking for: Vintage books edition, near-exact reprint of that copy that went to college with me.

I photographed the ISBN and mailed it to myself. Back to Amazon: if I search for editions of *Ulysses* or even just paperback editions of *Ulysses*, I do not find the Vintage edition at all. I do find its cover illustrated on one entry on page 13 of the hits, but that points only to four used copies priced each at more than \$2,000 (two thousand dollars: not a typo, but no explanation what could justify the price). If I input the ISBN, I get the correct edition, for \$12.45, Prime eligible. It comes with other tabs for hardcover and eBook editions, but those tabs lead to editions that have nothing to do with the Vintage edition. (When I wrote up this sad tale on the redoubtable *Liblicense-1* discussion list, a reader pointed me to an **Oxford World's Classics** edition. It is similarly invisible to the basic search but available if you know the ISBN already.)

That copy of *Ulysses* I took to college must have come from the **Basset Center Book Store** in El Paso, where the leftist philosopher **Paul Goodman's** books spun on a rotating rack just across the aisle from the special corner hosting the richest selection of **John Birch Society** publications I've ever seen. I never knew I had it so good. And you can't go home again.

You can, of course, go to a library. I'll resume this story in my next column and explore the alternatives. **Joyce** is not dead yet. 🌿

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throughout the process. If you don't write it down; it doesn't exist and at the very least cannot be measured.

A strategy document for negotiations is really a "living" text, which means that as you progress through the process, some demands will be met whereas others may go unfulfilled. That's what naturally happens and it is certainly understandable that you may win some and lose some. No matter, to gain your favorable results along the way leading to the final objective, stay the course, continually assess yourself and success will be imminent.

I am reminded of the song sung by the great **Harry Belafonte** called "Hosanna." The opening line of this calypso tune is "House built on a weak foundation, will not stand." In negotiating, the foundation of those discussions must be built on a strong foundation. That involves Objectives, Timetable, Team, and Strategy. If those four elements are covered, the library will be prepared and after all, preparation is the name of the game. If not adequately prepared, success will be fleeting, if at all. 🌿

Mike is currently the President of Gruenberg Consulting, LLC, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, "Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success" is available on Amazon, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. www.gruenbergconsulting.com

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Being Earnest with Collections from page 75

- Unglue.it: free to join, and pledges accepted. Not supporting at this time.
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Along with these investments in external programs, we're investing internally as well. **Dr. Miller** has initiated an internal grant program for Rollins faculty as an incentive to adopt and/or create open educational resources (OER) for their courses. Our OER page at <http://www.rollins.edu/library/services/oer.html> provides an explanation of the grant program, a brief note on the costs of textbooks (some are over \$350), and links to OER repositories. The grant provides a stipend to the faculty member, as well as a team of collaborators consisting of a librarian, an instructional technologist, and the director of our Institute for Effective Teaching. The first recipient, **Dr. MacKenzie Moon Ryan**, is bringing OER to her course on global art history.

After **Dr. Miller** presented the OER grant program at the Florida ACRL meeting last week, several in attendance remarked that he had given them a nudge toward actually taking action and investing in what we're talking about so much. OER is an important element of the open access movement, and has become a hot topic recently as textbook prices continue to rise.

As we head back to Charleston, I'm hoping to hear about how other librarians are choosing to invest in open access. Are you supporting some of the programs we've listed, and/or others? Are you collaborating with faculty members on identifying and/or creating OER, and researching the usage rights for those resources? If we're going to be earnest in supporting the open access movement, we're going to have to continue investing time and funding in open access resources. 🌿