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## Back Talk-Amazon

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**J**ohn Kenneth Galbraith famously said that the man who enters a room by leaning on a broken door — and then crashing and stumbling through it when it fails — gets an undeserved reputation for violence. I've always thought of that line when I stop to think about **Jeff Bezos** and **Amazon**.

What **Bezos** did in the mid-90s seemed revolutionary. Yes, he dramatically upended the bookselling business and has taken huge market share away from the players in that space and now throws his weight around enormously. But he had help.

The bookselling business back in the 1990s, like the taxi-driving business five years ago, was surrounded by opportunities the established players were too blind to see. Remember what it was like to special order a particular book at your local bookstore then? You had to page through the blindingly small print of *Books in Print*, fill out a little form (usually with carbons), and wait 3-6 weeks, calling the store a few times to see if it had come in. After that time, there was a very good chance you'd be told they'd been unable to find the title and almost as good a chance that they'd have something but it would be the wrong thing.

It wasn't any magical new technology **Amazon** used to improve on that state of affairs. A database, an online interface to an order form, and a contract with **UPS** to deliver didn't require wizardry beyond imagining. The existing industry could have done all that. But the booksellers of 1995 and the taxis of 2015 that let ride sharing eat their lunch both missed their chance.

So when **Amazon** started opening "bricks and mortar" stores a few months ago, I was curious. A few weeks ago, I took a quick trip up to Chicago to see what the future looks like. What can librarians learn from the deep insights **Amazon** must have about books and print and bringing users and books together?

I was amazed.

My Uber (not a taxi) dropped me off in front of a nondescript storefront on the north side, in a gentrifying neighborhood a few blocks from Wrigley Field, and I slipped inside. The first

thing I noticed was how small the shop was: about 3,000 square feet, by my later pacing it off. On my right was a coffee bar with no customers on a weekday morning, in front of me was a table for displaying **Amazon's** Echo product, and I could see more e-gadgets off to the right. The books started on my left.

There weren't many books. I stayed a couple of hours, counting, obsessing, and scratching my head to make sense of what I saw.

OK, there were two things about the store you could call innovations. First, all the books were displayed face out, covers front. And there were no price tags. To find out what any book costs, you need to have the app on your phone and scan it or take it to one of several scanners in the store, there to see the price for the general public and another price for **Amazon Prime** customers.

The store has about 3,600 titles, evenly decided among children's books (about 1,200), what I call "books lite" (arts and crafts, travel guides, self-help, business and money, gardening — another 1,200), and what I call "real books" (history, fiction, biography, "assorted nonfiction" and the like). With separate sections for science fiction (140 titles), mysteries (140 titles), and romance literature (21 titles!), the core of fiction and literature came to 400 titles.

Not much? You're right.

Take mysteries. There was room on the shelves for 140 titles, but with blank spaces, there were actually about 108. There were four **James Patterson** titles, four **Tana French**, three **Janet Evanovich**, two **Louise Penny**, two **Craig Allen Johnson/Longmire**, and one (the most recent) **Donna Leon**. **Alexander McCall Smith** was represented in the store only by the first title in the *Ladies Detective Agency* series, **Andrea Camilleri** by the most recent paperback *Inspector Montalbano*. Of pre-contemporary mysteries, there were three **Agatha Christies** (a volume of Poirot short stories, *Then There Were None*, and *Murder on the Orient Express*), two **Raymond Chandlers** (*The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye*), two mass-market paperbacks of **Sherlock Holmes**,

two by **Ian Fleming**. Those 12 authors accounted for 27 of the 108 titles on the shelves. If I were a **James Patterson** reader, would I think a store with four of his titles would be a good place to shop?

No author that I saw anywhere was represented by more than four titles. In history, the only one with that many was **Bill O'Reilly**. In history, the only two titles published before about the year 2000 were **Dee Brown's** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and **Truman Capote's** *In Cold Blood* (history?). In literature, the only two authors at all well represented were **Elena Ferrante** (all four of her quartet) and **Tolkien's** *Hobbit* and *LOTR*. Other notables were: **J.D. Salinger** (*Franny and Zooey* and *Nine Stories*); **Jane Austen** (*Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*); **Vladimir Nabokov** (*Lolita*); **Leo Tolstoy** (*War and Peace*); **Homer** (*Odyssey*); **James Joyce** (*Dubliners*). But there were three different editions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* — for the few remaining Chicagoans who have never read it? I found exactly 10 books in the fiction/literature section written by writers born before 1900.

Perhaps **Bezos** has never been interested in books? Perhaps, for him, they were a gateway drug, a place to start. Book buyers, after all, are intelligent, middle class and above all, with discretionary cash. Bust through the infirm door of the bookselling business, capture a vast audience of consumers, and then set out to sell them everything else. If you're **Bezos**, you don't really have to care about books, or people who read books, or what becomes of the culture when you destabilize publishers and bookstores: probably books themselves don't matter to you.

My suspicion is that the store (and others opened since) exists in order to *pretend* to be a bookstore, to lure in people like me, but really to sell the high-margin electronic items. The Echo product is still an abstract concept to many, so the store is a convenient place where to lure folks in for a demo. A less generous interpretation would be that they've just made a silly mistake!

The real future of the printed book won't be determined by **Jeff Bezos**, nor should we expect it to be, nor should we let it be. There are still many highly trained professionals who are serious about bringing books and readers together — lots of books, even old books, and lots of readers. The name for that group of people is "librarians." We shouldn't walk around the virtual and physical worlds of **Amazon** retail just shaking our heads. This is our opportunity.

At **Arizona State University**, we currently have a grant from the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** to begin rethinking, for a huge library renovation we're beginning, just what we do with print books when we set them out on shelves for our readers. Which books? How

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# Charleston Comings and Goings: News and Announcements for the Charleston Library Conference

by **Leah Hinds** (Assistant Director, Charleston Conference) <leah@charlestonlibraryconference.com>

Since I have a hard time remembering the change myself, here's another reminder that the days have shifted for this year's conference, **November 6-10**. The pre-conferences will be on Monday and Tuesday, the Vendor Showcase will be on Tuesday, and the main conference will be Wednesday through Friday. I keep confusing myself by thinking Wednesday for the Vendor Showcase — can't get it through my head that it's now on Tuesday! We hope the transition will be easier for attendees and will be a welcome change to be finished before the weekend.

In an effort to consolidate and make things simpler, we have re-organized our session topical threads into the following groups:

- AN: Analytics
- CD: Collections
- LS: Library Services
- MT: Management
- SC: Scholarly Communication
- TE: Technology
- UC: Up & Coming

This year, we are also thrilled to announce a new topic thread: Up & Coming (UC). The UC thread is intended for attendees who are...

- New to the profession of library and information studies, including librarians, library staff, vendors, publishers, content providers, consultants, and researchers.
- New to the Charleston Conference.
- New to the specific areas of focus of the Charleston Conference (collection development, acquisitions, instruction, scholarly communication, technical services, vendor/publisher relations).
- MLIS students and recent graduates.
- Those with no or limited prior experience presenting at professional conferences.

The UC thread is a terrific opportunity for up & comers to:

- Become actively involved in the Charleston Conference.
- Make a stronger case to attend the Charleston Conference.

- Share your unique experience and knowhow in a supportive, reputable professional sphere.
- Hone your presentation skills.

We also had a call for nominations to recognize and reward Up and Comers: librarians, library staff, vendors, publishers, MLIS students, instructors, consultants, and researchers who are new to their field or are in the early years of the profession. Watch for the recipients to be announced next month! We're excited to celebrate the winners. The 2017 Up and Comers will be recognized in the December 16-January 17 issue of *Against the Grain*, and 20 of these brilliant rising stars will be profiled in the same issue.

In addition, they will be featured in a series of scheduled podcast interviews that will be posted on the *ATGthePodcast.com* website. There will be a reception at the conference on Tuesday, November 7, at 7:00 pm for all first time attendees and the Up and Comers to meet the conference mentors and conference directors. Look for more details in the schedule!

The poster sessions will be held in the Carolina Ballroom of the Francis Marion Hotel on Wednesday, November 8. Presenters will be available to answer questions and narrate their posters. Running concurrently with the poster sessions is a "Happy Hour Networking" event with appetizers and a cash bar. You can mix, mingle, get a bite to eat, and visit the posters all at one time. Also available will be a Speed Networking session — similar to "speed dating" but for professional networking — that will take place in the Calhoun Room just down the hall from the posters.

Virtual Posters are PDF poster images and video presentations that will be displayed on large flat screen monitors during the Poster Sessions as well as on the conference website. We have purchased a new iPad app that will function much like Netflix, where you can scroll through categories with poster thumbnails and titles, then select a poster to view on the big screen. You can zoom and swipe on the iPad

to enlarge the view on the big screen as well. We're really excited about this new format for viewing posters and look forward to sharing it with our attendees! The Virtual Poster screens will be located in the Francis Marion Hotel mezzanine level prefunction/hallway space between the Carolina Ballrooms, where the traditional poster sessions and presenters will be, and the Calhoun Room, where the Speed Networking session will be held.

Back again for another year, the Juried Product Development Forums will be available for librarians/library workers attending the conference. These focus groups are designed for publishers and vendors with new products

that are currently in development, or who are in the process of making improvements to existing products, to seek feedback and input from their users. It is a chance for librarians to

influence the development, pricing, and features of the

products they may be using in the future. The goal of these sessions is to be a win-win situation — not to be a commercial or promotion, but to actively work together to the benefit of everyone involved. Invitations will be emailed to registered librarians later this month, so be on the lookout and be sure to RSVP to attend the session of your choice.

Registration is still open, and the early bird discount deadline is September 15. Don't miss out on the significantly lower rate! Pre-conference registration is also still available, and if you've already registered for the conference but wish to add a pre-conference you can do so at <https://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/conference-registration-2/>. A complete list of pre-conferences is available at <https://2017charlestonconference.sched.com/overview/type/Preconference>.

That's it for now — stay tuned to the **Charleston Conference** website and the *Against the Grain NewsChannel* for more updates: [www.charlestonlibraryconference.com](http://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com) and [www.against-the-grain.com](http://www.against-the-grain.com). 🌱



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The CMU institutional repository powered by Figshare, KiltHub is available at [kilt.hub.cmu.edu](http://kilt.hub.cmu.edu).

For CMU's strategic direction, see <https://www.cmu.edu/strategic-plan/goals/strategy/21st-century-library.html>.

Quick facts about CMU are available at <https://www.cmu.edu/strategic-plan/goals/strategy/21st-century-library.html>.

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many of them? How selected and presented? How designed to engage a generation of students who will show up in 2020 and 2030 from a world very different from the one we grew up in? We've got some good ideas, but I'll make you come to the **Charleston Conference** this fall to hear about them. Meanwhile, librarian and publishing colleagues, ask yourselves: what are you doing to ensure that printed books have a long and glorious future in front of them? 🌱

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