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Booksellers Find Success Online

By John Fitzgerald, Billings Gazette, Mont.

Aug. 29--It's the word's oldest profession: the sale of books.

For years, this meant hoofing it down to the local bookstore to peruse the latest offerings or, if rare books are your thing, paging through a sometimes expensive catalog from rare booksellers.

The Internet has changed all that.

"My little 1,500-square-foot book store in Billings now houses 40 million books because that's what I have access to on the Internet," said Jon Willette, owner of Buy the Book, 2040 Rosebud Drive.

It's a trend that has been going on for years, said rare-book expert Tom Congalton, owner of Between the Covers Rare Books in Merchantville, N.J.

"Book-selling was one of the first professions that lent itself to the Internet," he said. "Most bookstores have been online for long time. Books are quantifiable -- they're enough alike to put them into a database and enough different to be differentiated. The Internet is old news in the book trade."

In fact, there are several booksellers in Billings who have shunned opening a store in favor of operating solely on the Internet.

For two years, Kimberly Easton and her husband, Rev. Joseph L. Easton, have been selling their collection of religious and philosophy-themed books online.

Their company, Books to Ponder, operates with only an e-mail address -- ponder@intch.com. They advertise on several of the book-search engines, including www.abebooks.com, www.alibris.com, www.addall.com, www.barnesandnoble.com, www.amazon.com and www.bookfinder.com.

Joseph Easton, a retired Methodist minister, has collected well over 1,000 books. When he retired, the couple looked to this as a way to keep busy.

Kimberly Easton said she doesn't miss having a regular bookstore. "We've sold to people in Germany, Australia, Brazil -- all over the world. We sell an average of \$500 worth of books each month online."

For nearly three years, Randy Arstein has run Chimney Swift Books out of his home as a compliment to his full-time job. The company carries "obscure books, books from specialty presses, university presses, small poetry presses," he said, adding that he sells about 250 books a month.

He too operates with only an e-mail address: chimneyswiftbooks@msn.com. "We had been thinking about opening a book store, but with the financial costs, this was more feasible," Arstein said.

Some established book sellers have taken wary advantage of the Internet. Larry Kennedy, the owner of The Book Place, 2814 1st Ave. N., said he doesn't have a Web site and limits his Internet presence to "auctioning off a few books on places like Yahoo or eBay."

He said the benefits for his store have been limited to moving difficult books. "Books that would have a difficult time selling (because of Billings' location or buyers interests), I can move that inventory," he said.

Willette agrees. "There's a world market for this stuff. Obscure or specialty oriented books that can't sell in Montana can sell all over world. Books on the Civil War don't sell well in Billings, but they do down south, and I can sell it to them."

Toby Braun, the assistant to the owner of Broken Diamond Books, 2710 2nd Ave. N., said the store sells about three books a day through their e-mail address, brokendiament@worldnet.att.net He said the Internet is a mixed blessing. "We can sell books on the Internet, but since 2000 a lot of individuals are selling on the Internet and not looking for a profit, so it's hard for us to make a profit."

Willette said many buyers are being bamboozled. "People who have no idea what's going on, they think a book is valuable and it's not. The seller will misidentify or misdescribe the book and that results in problems."

A book's value is determined by what condition it is in and how rare the book is. Buyers and sellers use a shorthand language to describe the books and a neophyte buyer or seller could be scammed.

But all in all, Willette -- who can be reached at bibliodude@aol.com -- said the Internet has made selling a lot more fun.

"I just ordered book in German from Munich for a fellow here. I can't read it. It's something about horses."

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