



Thumbs down for Atwood's Invention

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By Rebecca Caldwell

Although still in its development stage, Margaret Atwood's remote autographing device has been given a thumbs down by users of abebooks.com, the world's largest on-line retail site for rare and used books.

The Victoria-based company that maintains the site conducted a poll regarding Atwood's device, which would enable an author in one location to inscribe a book for a reader in another location via computer terminals, and found that of their 460 respondents, 96 per cent felt that a book signed via a machine would be less valuable than one signed in person.

"We quite understand the idea behind Margaret Atwood's invention because, as she says in interviews, she is an old-age pensioner [who doesn't want to face the rigours of book tours], but the intriguing thing we found is that it's not so much the signature that fans care about, it's meeting the author in person, that's the real thrill," said Richard Davies, a spokesperson for abebooks.com.

One respondent wrote: "I have signed copies of George MacDonald Fraser's books [the *Flashman* series of historical novels] and to me it is not just that they are first editions with his name in them. I stood in line and was able to shake his hand. . . . No machine could give me that."

Another respondent from Boston wrote: "I can't believe that a collector would ever consider a 'virtual' signed book as truly a signed book anyway . . . and if it is difficult to distinguish between the two, the value of the signed-in-person books might be compromised. For myself, I think the whole idea is idiotic. . . . I'd rather have the book blank than stand in line for a computer to sign it."

Although there isn't a lot of support for Atwood's proposed machine on abebooks.com, there is high interest in her oeuvre, Davies said.

The website lists more than 12,200 copies of Atwood books, and there were about 2,000 searches on her name in the past 12 months. While *The Handmaid's Tale* ranks as one of the most popular requests, one of the more expensive books available is a signed 1969 first U.S. edition of *The Edible Woman*, her debut novel. Priced at \$5.95 on its release, the seller is now asking for \$2,450 (U.S.), although other signed, first-edition copies can be had for as little as \$350. Meanwhile, unsigned copies of the book, also first editions, range in price from \$40 to \$500.

"An autographed book is always going to be sought after, and if there is an extra story behind the autograph, such as a message, then that intrigues the book-buying public," said Davies. He said that if abebooks.com, which lists some 60 million volumes available from sellers around the world, ever listed books signed with a remote autograph device they would be identified to distinguish them from those signed in person.

Davies doesn't think that the author tour will be replaced by the remote autographing session. "We don't think it will catch on. Unfortunately we think authors will still have to clock up the air miles," he said.