

vention, will be taking place for the first time in Toronto this October, around the same time as the Harborfront Festival (see below). This is of particular interest to McArthur because she is the publisher of one of the preeminent mystery writers of the day, Scotland's Ian

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Rankin (only a couple of weeks after our encounter, she was in New York to see him win for Best Novel with his *Resurrection Men* at the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Awards).

Her small but lively company flourishes on the basis of some fine Canadian

The Big Boom at Abebooks

Online bookseller Advanced Book Exchange—Abebooks.com—is based in Victoria, B.C., and has an office in Düsseldorf, Germany. It went live in 1996 with four booksellers; last November, Abebooks.com reached the milestone of listing 50 million books for 12,000 independent booksellers (8,500 of which are North American), making it the largest online marketplace for books in the world. Each day approximately 20,000 books are sold on the four international Abebooks sites: Abebooks.com, abebooks.co.uk, abebooks.de and abebooks.fr. The company was named the named top e-business site by the UN Summit Awards in 2003, and is one of Canada's top 100 employers.

One of the things that differentiates Abebooks from its competitors is that it does not hide its members in the technology. "The details on our site—contact information for booksellers, for example—are transparent, and it fosters a very dynamic community group. Our chatrooms see a lot of discussion as well," says company spokesperson Marci Crossan. In March, a dedicated "Libros en Español" page consolidated the approximately 200,000 Spanish books previously listed among the 500,000 titles on the site (the number of Spanish books listed has since doubled).

Abebooks' roots may be in used and rare books, but it is seeing that distinction blur. "What we're seeing as an open marketplace is a meeting of the used and new book markets, and our surveys have shown that every used book buyer is also a new book buyer," says Crossan. At BEA, Abebooks will announce details of its move into "new" books, although it has already soft-launched the initiative, quietly selling new titles for several weeks. It's a big shift for the company and something that Crossan says publishers have been asking for, particularly smaller North American independent publishers attracted by Abebooks' daily traffic statistics.

According to its surveys, most of Abebooks' 1.25 million registered users browse favorite used and antiquarian bookstores; now, the company is looking to broaden its customer base. The first phase in raising consumer awareness of its brand began in January, when a new director of marketing, Lisa Stevens, left her position as senior vice-president of marketing at Sony Classical in New York to lead the marketing team in Victoria. At BEA, Abebooks will launch its biggest ad campaign: "Because You Read," a lifestyle campaign Stevens hopes will raise North American consumer awareness about the brand, reaching beyond the book collector to the avid book buyer. While the company won't pinpoint a dollar figure, the major consumer campaign will appear in major print dailies, monthlies and weeklies, with a particular focus on urban locations in the U.S. and the U.K.

But Abebooks is not looking to become an Amazon. "It's really all about books," says Stevens, "and our buyers and sellers really respond to the fact that we're not selling coffee makers or Pez dispensers in with books." There's no question that Abebooks, which remains a private company, will be watching closely to see how the market reacts to competitor Alibris's recent IPO. "Our gross sales for last year were about \$100 million U.S.," says Crossan, "and we have no debt load." Not to mention that Alibris recorded half the sales that Abebooks did in 2003.



Abebooks CEO Hannes Blum (l.) and COO Boris Wertz: B.C.-based company lists 50 million books.

—N.A.