

Feature Sections ▾

Today's Features

> @Biz

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Stock Quote

 Ticker
 Name

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H 12 / L 2

[4 Day Forecast](#)

> CAREERS

> STAR CLASSIFIEDS

> NEW IN HOMES

News

Ontario

Canada

World

Opinion/Editorials

Letters

National Report

World Report

Obituaries

Editorial Cartoon

Today's Paper

Corrections

Star Columnists

> ADVERTISEMENT <



Special Reports

- > Ontario Votes
- > SARS Investigation
- > Municipal Election
- > Postwar Iraq
- > West Nile
- > MLB Playoffs
- > [More Specials]

My Email Newsletters

My Scoreboard

My Stock List

My Subscription

Features

- > Brand New Planet
- > Contests/Events
- > Crosswords
- > Ellie
- > Horoscopes
- > Lottery Results
- > Order Hockey Cards
- > Traffic Cams
- > TV Listings

Initiatives

- > Classroom Connection

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Oct. 5, 2003. 01:00 AM

Used book biz goes from dusty to dot-com

B.C. company puts indie booksellers on the Net

Hugely successful despite a troubled book industry

JUDY STOFFMAN
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

J.M. Coetzee, who won the Nobel prize for literature on Thursday, published his first book, *Dusklands*, in 1974 with a small South African publisher, Raven's Press. That rare edition is now selling for \$1,070. A copy is being offered by Sandra and John Berryman, booksellers in Ormond Beach, Fla., who immediately raised the price from \$670 after Coetzee won the prestigious award.

For this arcane information, one has only to go on the Internet to Abebooks.com, which is a perfect melding of a very old and dusty trade (antiquarian bookselling) with a new, clean one (dot-com retailing).

In the troubled world of bookselling, Abebooks is one of the most astonishing success stories not only in Canada but in the world. Profitable from the day it started, it has become the world's largest marketplace for used, rare and out-of-print books, although its 100 employees never handle a book during their workday. *Forbes* magazine called it the "best of the best in the rare book category."

Abebooks was launched seven years ago by two couples on Vancouver Island, B.C.

Cathy Waters was running Timeless Books, a used bookstore in Victoria, in 1995 when a customer came in looking for a first edition D.H. Lawrence. Waters did the only thing possible: put ads in trade publications asking other booksellers if any of them had the book.

A few weeks later, Cathy's husband Keith Waters, a computer programmer working for the B.C. government, watched her trying to sort the hundreds of replies she received by mail and hit upon the idea of creating a searchable database of used books and their locations.

He asked computer-savvy friend Rick Pura and his wife Vivian to help.

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Thus was born Advanced Book Exchange (ABE), with four bookstores participating. Partnerships with Amazon.com and e-Bay grew the company, and the purchase of JustBooks, a virtual bookseller in Germany, in 2001 started its expansion overseas.

With subsidiaries in Germany (Abebooks.de), Britain (Abebooks.co.uk) and France (Abebooks.fr), Abebooks.com is a virtual storehouse of more than 45 million books originating from 12,000 independent booksellers in 42 countries. Each day, it sells between 15,000 and 20,000 books — \$134 million worth of books a year. Member booksellers fill the orders.

"We were thrilled that we had a bookseller in Nepal join recently," says Marci Crossan, spokesperson for the firm.

Booksellers list their stock on Abebooks.com for a fee ranging from about \$35 a month for up to 500 books, to \$400 for 150,000 or more. They also pay a small commission per sale.

Abebooks.com is a virtual storehouse of more than 45 million books originating from 12,000 independent booksellers in 42 countries

If you buy your desired volume on the site, it can arrive from anywhere — Boston or Houston, St. John's, Nfld., or Manchester in England. Janet Inksetter, owner of Annex Books on Bathurst St., says she's filled orders for Canadian literature (her specialty) from Finland, Iceland, Australia and Fiji since joining the Abebooks network almost three years ago.

Says Inksetter: "I've sold a few thousand books online, most of them through ABE since I've been with them." But she points out a downside to ABE's success: "They have changed their policies. They used to only charge a flat fee for the number of books you put up, but now they take 5 per cent of the price, so it has become an expensive way for me to sell books."

With a net cast so widely, there is almost no book ever published that you can't haul up from the deep.

"We discovered through the Internet in general that there were books that we thought were very rare (but) turned out not to be all that rare, so sometimes prices for those books have come down," says Inksetter. She says that many sellers on the site are finding books at garage sales and selling from their basements, so they have no overhead and can undercut bookstore owners like herself. "I looked up a book for a customer on Abebooks the other day and the price varied from \$1 to \$50 for books purportedly in the same condition," she says.

Marci Crossan says that Abebooks staff see trends in book collecting. "We've seen Dr. Seuss books skyrocket in value. If you happen to have a first edition of *Cat In The Hat*, it's worth about \$18,000. And cookbook collecting has taken off. Laura Bush is an avid collector. A first printing of *The Joy Of Cooking* from 1931 sold for \$4,690."

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**TORONTO STAR
Syndicate**

Old Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries are also hot, perhaps because they appeal to Boomer nostalgia. Franklin Dixon's first Hardy Boys mystery, *The Tower Treasure* (1927), sold for \$3,770.

Among Canadian books, Margaret Atwood's early work is always sought after. Currently Jim Docherty, a bookseller in Gananoque, Ont., is selling the Contact Press edition of *The Circle Game*, Atwood's 1966 poetry collection that first brought her acclaim and a Governor General's award, for \$1,740.

A popular service added this year is BookSleuth, a place on the site where readers who can't remember the title or author of a book they're seeking post what they recall of its plot or characters and invite other people to identify it.

For example, Jackie from Nanaimo, B.C., writes that she can't remember the name of a book about a little girl, possibly named Genevieve, who will not go to bed and stays up later and later. "This has made me nuts for years," she writes. A woman from California replies with the titles of two possible books (*Edie Changes Her Mind* and *A Sleepy Story*).

In a waterfront building in Victoria, about 80 of the company's 100 staffers work on telephone support to customers and booksellers or on maintaining the site (20 others work in the Dusseldorf office in Germany). Boardrooms are named The Hemingway and The Atwood, and the Internet servers housed in another building are referred to as Poe and Dante. Crossan calls the staff a mix of webheads, techies and bibliophiles.

The founders have stepped back from running the firm, which has been employee-owned since 2000. Keith Waters is just a consultant now and Vivian Pura is vice-president of human resources.

All those who hunt after forgotten books owe them big time.

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