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By the book

Critics said the web would destroy small booksellers, but the internet has actually given them a new lease of life, says Richard Adams

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It wasn't meant to be like this. The internet was supposed to bid farewell to the need for buying books in shops. When the dotcom bubble was at its peak, web gurus claimed sites such as Amazon would undercut and undermine traditional bookstores, and that ebooks would eventually do away with "dead tree" media altogether.

But what no one saw coming was that the internet would, in fact, provide a lifeline for possibly the least fashionable and most technologically backward part of the marketplace: old books.

While shops selling the latest Harry Potter or Tom Clancy novel have had to grapple with competition from online upstarts offering deep discounts and convenient delivery, the fusty world of second-hand bookselling has increasingly embraced the net not just to compete, but also to expand its horizons.

Ralph Robinson exemplifies the internet's ability to breathe new life into the second-hand book market. A teacher in St Margaret's Hope, on the Orkney Islands, Robinson has found that the isolation of a remote Scottish archipelago is no barrier to establishing a business. He specialises in selling the works of Orkney authors such as the poet George Mackay Brown and writer Eric Linklater, but also trades in more general works.

"If you have quality books, then people will buy them from all over the world, no matter where you are based," says Robinson, who started as a collector of first editions.

Although he has his own website, much of his business comes through two of the big players in the second-hand book world: the leading website Abebooks, and Amazon's used book offshoot.

"My favourite site is



The London Review Bookshop in Bloomsbury



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Abebooks, because it tends to have better quality books for sale," says Robinson.

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Based in Canada and originally called the Advanced Book Exchange, Abebooks was started in the web's pioneer days by Keith and Cathy Waters, a husband and wife team. Since it was formed in 1996, the company has remained privately owned and has taken over its European rival, JustBooks, to help give it a strong base on this side of the Atlantic.

The business model is simple: second-hand bookshop owners and dealers upload their catalogue to Abebooks' database for a monthly fee, up to \$65 for listing 20,000 books. In addition, the company charges a commission of 8% on every purchase made through its website.

Abebooks now carries more than 2,000 UK-based second-hand booksellers and a total of 12,000 independent booksellers across 45 countries. They claim there are more than 55m books on sale at any one time.

The company sells a daily average of 20,000 books, with around 4m visitors combing through the site each month and an additional 30,000 to 50,000 new entries loaded on to the database every day.

The major rival to Abebooks is Amazon's suite of sites, which offers customers used and second-hand books alongside searches for new titles on Amazon's main retail effort. They also allow for specialist second-hand searches.

Amazon offers unlimited catalogue listings for up to \$47 per month, but a stiffer 15% commission on each sale. It claims to have more than 20,000 individual booksellers, and an estimated 70m used books in its catalogues - although the high number of duplicates makes it hard to judge an accurate figure.

Behind Amazon and Abebooks there are a gaggle of rivals, some of which specialise in rare or antiquarian books. The biggest of the chasing pack is Alibris, a US-based firm, which boasts a slick website with more than 10,000 participating dealers and 35m books. It also carries films and music but does not charge a monthly listing fee. Instead, there is a one-off \$50 joining fee and a hefty 20% commission.

While the sites are in competition with each other, in practice most second-hand booksellers sign up to more than one site. Robinson says he used to use Alibris but gave up because the site's insistence on using particular courier firms to send orders via London made it impractical.

Bookseller Stuart Manley lists his shop's books on a variety of sites, including Abebooks, Amazon and Alibris. He is the

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proprietor of the picturesque Barter Books, which is based in an old Victorian railway station in Alnwick, Northumberland. Manley also lists his stock on smaller sites such as UK Bookworld, a UK-only site notable for charging a modest annual fee instead of commission; TomFolio, a cooperative-owned site selling shares for \$500, which charges \$45 a month for listing 20,000 titles; and Choose Books, with no listing fees and variable commissions as low as 5%.

Manley has been running the bookshop since 1991, and was one of the first to start using the internet when in 1995 he set up the shop's first website. He has witnessed the rapid expansion of second-hand book sales over the web.

"Four years ago, there were 10,000 dealers on the net worldwide. Now there's around 30,000. The bulk of the new arrivals are spare bedroom operators, people doing it as a sideline," he says.

Sheer weight of numbers is making it harder for new outfits to survive, he says. "There are indications that the 'golden age' on the internet is over - there are so many sellers now that individual booksellers are feeling it."

According to feedback from other online sellers, competition from the new entrants has meant lower prices and diminishing sales. "We have flattened out," Manley admits.

Manley says that over the past two years, Barter Books' own site is its leading sales generator, although there are suggestions that customers use sites such as Abebooks to locate books they want, and then order them separately through the shop's website at slightly lower prices. Next in terms of sales value comes Abebooks, followed by Amazon (including .com and .co.uk versions), and Alibris.

To get an idea of the relative popularity of the various sites, for every pound in sales at Barter Books generated by Alibris, the shop receives £2.70 in orders from the two Amazon sites, £5 from Abebooks, and nearly £9 from the shop's own website.

The size and usefulness of the three main sites becomes apparent when comparison shopping. A search for a copy of Geoff Dyer's entertaining account of DH Lawrence, *Out Of Sheer Rage*, finds 120 copies available on Alibris. Its prices started at £1.60 for a used paperback from a bookseller in Massachusetts. That seller also had the book listed for the same price on Abebooks, but was undercut by a £1 offer from a UK-based book shop. Abebooks boasted 165 copies for sale, way ahead of Amazon.co.uk's 32 copies, while Amazon's lowest price was £1.05.

While the difference does not sound like much, it is obvious when scrolling through the listings that Abebooks and Amazon have more UK-based booksellers than Alibris. The problem with Amazon, in this case, was that it had separate listings for the four different editions of Dyer's work. Alibris and Abebooks, on the other hand, collate all editions - a far less taxing proposition.

When looking for something more exotic, it becomes apparent that Abebooks' listings are superior to rivals. There has been only one recent English translation of the

neglected Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard's book of short stories, *The Voice Imitator*. While Alibris and Amazon listed eight copies each, Abebooks nearly doubled that with 14.

While there are a substantial number of "spare bedroom operators", professional booksellers in the main seem to use these services to help supplement their profits. Unlike Robinson, the majority of Barter Books' trade is conventional traffic through the door. Only about a fifth of the shop's turnover comes from internet sales. Even so, web sales require the attention of two full-time staff to service orders and maintain the various online catalogues.

They might not be ditching the traditional shop, but the suggestion that booksellers would crumble under the challenge of the internet has been utterly refuted.

Instead of becoming a footnote in bookselling history, the industry has used the web to secure its future. And the resulting competition between the main players means that, right now at least, the second-hand book field really is a buyer's market.

Links

Ralph Robinson <http://orkneybooks.com>

Abebooks www.abebooks.co.uk

Alibris www.alibris.com

Barter Books <http://barterbooks.co.uk>

Amazon www.amazon.com

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