

# 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY BOOKSELLING

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## INTRODUCTION: A NOSTALGIC PEEK AT HISTORY

For those who still have an active imagination and love to read, there was a time when finding a good book was a simple function of heading down to the local bookstore, perusing the New Releases section to see what was new, or checking the alphabetized stacks for the name of your favorite authors to see if they'd released anything new or had a copy of a work you didn't already have in your collection. That was an enjoyable experience, browsing like a kid in a toy store, filled with the anticipation of finding a new treasure, a new adventure, a vehicle to make your leisure time filled with new ideas and experiences, meeting new and exciting characters and being swept away to far away places. It was all very romantic and stimulating, if you remember. But all that changed. You may not have even noticed, for the bookselling industry has worked very hard to try and maintain the façade of that pleasurable experience of yesteryear. Oh, but rest assured, it has changed—in some ways for the better, but in many ways for the worse.

For decades, the selling of books was almost the exclusive province of the local bookstore. Sure, you could find some pulp-fiction dime novels down at the drugstore or grocery store, but for the most part, books were sold by book merchants just like meat was sold by the butcher. There were no universal distribution systems long ago, so bookstores acquired their stock either by developing relationships with specific publishers and their sales forces, or by attending book fairs and finding out what was available to order for their stores. This created a lot of regionalization of titles and specialization of categories and genres, all driven primarily by the tastes and preferences of the individual bookstore owners/managers. Bookstore owners tended to function as independent businesses, whether small mom & pop operations, or larger retail companies. And in this model it was not unusual to find a healthy representation of category bookstores: mystery bookstores, science fiction and fantasy bookstores, and the like.

Unfortunately, Mystery bookstores are becoming fewer and far between; and Sci-Fi bookstores, I'm sad to say, are all but extinct. In fact, the whole concept of the mom & pop independent bookstore is on the endangered species list. This is primarily due to what I personally refer to as the "Wal-Mart-ization" of bookselling.

## WAL-MART-IZATION

Sam Walton became a billionaire by turning his small Arkansas-based retail chain into the largest retail empire the world has ever seen. For Wal-Mart stockholders, and for their vast sea of customers, that's a good thing. Mr. Walton's secret to success was understanding the power of volume purchasing and efficient distribution logistics. He realized that an individual store only had a finite amount of purchasing power, but a hundred stores or more could buy in vastly greater volume, getting much deeper discounts from suppliers, and therefore able to pass greater savings on to the consumer, while at the same time being much more price competitive than any of its competition. All that is true, and it's smart business policy. However, when a Wal-Mart is built in a small to medium sized town, its shelves are stocked with products bought via high-volume contracts representing an army of sister stores, whereas the existing merchants in those smaller communities must stand alone. The net result: many independent merchants in smaller communities have been put out of business by Wal-Mart.

You may or may not have a lot of sympathy for those hardware stores, clothing shops, general stores, etc. that Wal-Mart is directly responsible for killing across the country. A free market economy thrives on the law of the jungle—where only the strong survive. You can't very well blame a consumer for going to Wal-Mart to buy a pair of blue jeans or a garden shovel for half the price they sell for at any other place in town. That's just being a smart shopper.

If you think about it, Wal-Mart didn't really invent this concept; they have just done more with it than any other retail entity in history. It really began when the concept of the "Mall" and "Major Department Stores" came about. Sears & Roebuck was the king of retail back in the 1960's and 1970's. They really led the way in creating a single retail environment where you could buy ladies' lingerie and hardware in the same store. The buying power of Sears also put a lot of smaller mom & pop specialty stores out of business. What's interesting to note is how other retailers have responded to the Wal-Mart-ization of their markets. There typically have been three strategies to deal with it:

- 1) **Do it Bigger and Better**
- 2) **Accepting Tier-2 status and carving out niche convenience for consumers, or**
- 3) **Going Premium**

The first strategy was what Lowes did to Home Depot (and is still doing), and what K-Mart originally did to Sears. There's nothing revolutionary there. They're just attempting to beat Home Depot at their own game, building stores as big, if not bigger, and for the most part, copying their model exactly. Yet what they really share in common, as all who embrace the Wal-Mart retail model do, is to offer only the absolute top selling, mass-market brands of the various products they sell. That's easy to understand, for they represent the products that are most widely accepted and those available at the best wholesale costs for the retailer. Please make a note of that point, as it comes in later when we swerve back from this background tangent to the context of bookstores.

The second strategy is what Ace Hardware and True Value Hardware have done to survive in light of both Home Depot and Lowes. For example, in my town (~100,000 people) there's one Home Depot and one Lowes, but several Ace's and True Value's. The Home Depot and Lowes have a much better selection at better prices, but I have to drive over a half an hour to get to either of them. The nearest Ace and True Value is right down the street. So if I need something small and need it quick to fix something, I'm headed to Ace. If I need a new lawn mower, I'm going to Home Depot.

The third strategy was what the high-end department stores did to compete with Sears, such as Dillards, Lord & Taylor, Nieman Marcus, Saks, and the like. They chose to go Premium, and offer top of the line brands that Sears, and now Wal-Mart, doesn't carry. Sorry, no mink coats or Armani suits for sale at Wal-Mart. And by doing this, those retailers address an entirely different market segment than the average Wal-Mart shopper, and the end result is a peaceful coexistence among retailers.

The interesting case study in this strategy is what Target has done. Unlike Saks or Niemans, Target aims for the same demographic that Wal-Mart does, but has managed achieve a certain reputation of having slightly more upscale and prestigious products. While millions of people buy their clothes at Wal-Mart, the expression "She looks like she bought that dress at Wal-Mart" isn't a compliment. Whereas, if a woman asked her friend where she bought a sweater or blouse, the friend answering, "I found it on sale at Target" doesn't generate any embarrassment. So in a strange way Target has found a way to coexist with Wal-Mart, on the same turf, by adopting a little "premium" flair to their presentation.

What does all this have to do with selling books? Everything.

## THE WAL-MART-IZATION OF BOOKSELLING

There have been bookstore chains for decades. Most of them, like Waldenbooks and B. Dalton Bookseller were usually always found down at the Mall. Yet in recent years we've seen the rise of the Mega-booksellers: Barnes & Noble, Borders, Booksamillion and the like. These major corporations have flourished by employing the same basic business strategies as Wal-Mart. Two-thousand stores can buy books in much greater volume than any mom & pop bookstore in any town. That then allows them to sell those books at a much lower cost to consumers, while generating attractive profits for themselves. And just as was the case with the small independent hardware stores and clothing shops, the independent bookseller is rapidly becoming an endangered species. Yet in the context of bookselling, something really terrible has occurred, unique to the publishing industry.

You see, when a major retailer is stocking blue jeans or batteries, establishing a contract with Levis and/or Wrangler or with Eveready and/or Duracell is a pretty straightforward concept. There just aren't very many new brands of batteries coming on the market every day. To tell you the truth, I can't recall ever seeing a new one. Likewise, some new clothing designer may come out with a new style of jeans, but unless millions of people are clamoring for them, Wal-Mart isn't going to stock them, nor would you expect them to. But when it comes to books, each and every one of them is a unique product. So consider the retailer's dilemma. There are two primary battery makers: Duracell and Eveready. That's pretty simple. A retailer can carry one of them or both. However, there are over 170,000 new book titles published every year. Imagine if those were different brands of batteries. No one could ever stock 170,000 different brands of batteries, nor would they ever want to. No offense to Duracell or Eveready, but in the grand scheme of things, a battery is a battery. It's either the right size to fit the gadget you need or it isn't. There's no market need for 170,000 different brands of batteries. There's no need for 170,000 different styles of jeans.

With this concept in mind, it suddenly becomes no mystery to see why the major book chains primarily only carry bestselling authors and perennially popular books. It limits their purchasing choices to something manageable, and gears those choices to the "brands" that they are led to believe are going to be the most popular, generate the most sales, and therefore produce the greatest profits. These books are produced in the greatest volumes, so their underlying costs are the lowest, meaning that they can be acquired at the best discount levels. All this makes sense from a business standpoint. And when a famous celebrity, politician, political pundit, newsworthy soul, etc. who already commands a large and quantifiable audience wants to write and publish a book, they are immediately placed in the same category as popular authors with existing large audience bases of loyal fans. By virtue of the size of their audience they are automatically a "top brand," even if their book is a one-time event.

To ensure that all bookstores conform to this model, the wholesalers and major publishers have set up a system that is unbelievably "no risk" for the bookseller. I don't know of any other segment of the retail world that works the same way. That is, unlike most other retailers in the world, booksellers don't actually have to pay for any of the books they stock unless they are sold. That's right. A bookseller typically gets a catalog from the major wholesalers like Ingram Books or Baker & Taylor, which lists all the titles being released in an upcoming month by the major publishers. The catalog tells the booksellers what the "lead titles" are for each category, and ranks the A-List, B-List, and Mid-List titles accordingly. This list tells the bookseller explicitly which titles the publishers believe are going to be the bestsellers, from best to worst. Bookstores order accordingly.

There's no risk in this scenario for the bookseller because all they have to do is put the books on the New Releases racks, or in special displays that the publishers or wholesalers provide, and then let the public have at them. After a month or more, if the book sells out, the bookseller can order more. If the book sold

well and the bookseller still has stock, he can hang on to as much of it as he feels comfortable keeping, or he can return any unsold copies for full credit. He's in a no lose situation. It is, in essence, a giant "consignment store" arrangement. Wouldn't you love to open a store of any kind and not have to pay for any of your inventory up front? And that's exactly how the publishers and distributors want everything to work. The wrench in this whole model is that it doesn't work for two distinct groups of souls: 1) small independent bookstores, and 2) new authors who don't have existing celebrity status.

For the first group, the small booksellers, they're just like the small hardware stores and clothing shops crushed by Wal-Mart. They don't enjoy the same high-volume discount levels from the wholesalers that the major chains do. That's why when you walk into Barnes & Noble and see a huge stack of the latest bestseller with a 30% off sticker on it, you can rest assured that they're still making a nice profit on it. For the independent bookseller to sell all of the latest bestsellers at 30% off, he's lucky to still be able to keep 10% to 15% for himself. And when it comes to those really popular books, the top 20 to 25, then you also have Wal-Mart and Target, as well as Sam's Club and COSTCO, ordering them with all of their buying clout, which can beat the deals of even the biggest bookstore chains. So why is anyone going to buy the latest Stephen King or Tom Clancy novel from the local bookstore if they can get it at Wal-Mart for almost half its cover price? Answer: most people won't.

Now here comes the puzzling part. When you go into a small bookstore these days, not a used bookstore or specialty bookstore, but a general bookstore, what do you see? Mostly, you see the same bestsellers and titles you find at Barnes & Noble. Why? Because most booksellers have come to the conclusion that the only way they can survive having a Barnes & Noble in the same town is to adopt the Tier-2, or the second retail competitive strategy previously discussed, just like Ace Hardware or True Value Hardware. It's what I call the "7-Eleven" approach. The thinking is, if they are more "convenient" for consumers in the local area as opposed to having to drive much further to reach the big chain store, then people will buy those bestsellers from them, even if they are a little more expensive. It's the same logic other convenience stores use with selling a gallon of milk or a six-pack of beer. If you need it and don't have time to go all the way to the grocery store, the 7-Eleven is right there on the corner. You pay more, but you save time, and time is valuable, so everybody's happy.

Of course, as many a bankrupt bookseller can attest, this strategy is a formula for a slower death, but death nonetheless. Typically, outside of major metropolitan areas with very loyal niches, there just aren't enough consumers in most local areas to keep most of these stores alive. Some of them have tried to prolong their lives by offering other products, such as music CDs, DVDs, comic books, etc. But that only delays the inevitable as the chains continue to build new stores further and further into the suburbs and rural America, eventually eliminating the convenience argument. What these small bookstores never realized was that their only hope was to adopt one of the other strategies. Option One, i.e. doing it bigger and better, usually isn't feasible for an independent bookstore owner. It's unlikely they have the billions of dollars needed to compete in that fashion. I suppose an enterprising bookstore owner or small chain owner might one day try to assemble some type of a consortium or co-op to pool their purchasing power, but to date, I'm not aware of any of them getting together and giving that approach a try.

No, the only viable option for them is really the third option, which is to go Premium, or at least carve out a niche of *unique* products that the major chains don't offer. The erroneous premise that small and independent booksellers have accepted without challenge, is that what the publishing industry decrees are the bestsellers are the only books that need to be sold, or that have any real chance of selling. There's a built in fear factor in that mindset that says that unless they are carrying the "top titles" at any given moment, then their chances of making a sale are diminished. Said another way, if they were to order books further down on the lists, or from small presses, etc. then they're hurting their chances of selling anything at all, even if they can still return those lesser known books for full credit.

Some independent bookstore owners have managed to stay alive by migrating into the used books market. Whether they can get remaindered (returned) books from publishers or distributors, or buy them from consumers, they can get them for a fraction of their normal wholesale cost, usually pennies on the dollar, which can then be sold for a fraction of the original retail price. There definitely exists a market of consumers who want a bargain, even if the product they're buying is used. As long as a book is still in readable condition, someone can still enjoy it. A lot of people, especially the really avid readers who consume many books a week, frequent the used or half-price bookstores, bringing in a sack of books they've read to be sold, and taking a sack home of new ones (to them) that they've just picked out. They're happy. The bookstore owner makes a few bucks on each one sold, and best of all, the big chains don't do it. It's a market niche the small bookstore owner pretty much has all to himself in a given locality. And in that sense, the small stores and the big chain stores can peacefully coexist.

Another strategy smaller bookstores have employed is to specialize in rare or first editions, or in certain categories as we noted before such as Mystery books or Science-Fiction. Unfortunately, category bookstores can usually only survive in the largest metropolitan areas where there is enough of a loyal customer base for that one category to keep a store alive and in the black. So where does that leave the small independent bookseller if he isn't in a large metropolitan area or have any great desire to run a used bookstore? Answer: in a very awkward position. Like any business in any industry, if he can't competitively provide a unique product and/or service to meet a legitimate market need, there's no need for him.

This unpleasant truth is, however, all predicated upon one key premise. That premise is that there is a finite number of new books that *need* to be released each month to satisfy the complete reading appetites of all consumers, and that number of new titles is a relatively small number, not a big one. The thought here is that there are more than enough Romance novels, Mystery-Suspense, Science-Fiction, Fantasy, and any other fiction category released every month than are really needed to satisfy the demand. There are more than enough non-fiction titles released every month. Accepting this thinking as true means that wholesalers and retailers of these products might as well just stick to the most popular ones coming from the biggest and best names and not waste any time, energy or money on anything else.

Large or small, booksellers have come to accept these tenets as gospel. And over time, consumers have come to believe this is true, too. Why not? When you walk into Barnes & Noble or Borders is there any shortage of books? Hardly. Is there any shortage of choice? It doesn't appear so, but that's an entirely different question. How many choices are there really? As we said, over 170,000 new titles are released a year. Are there millions of different books on display and physically available at Barnes & Noble? No. But they're all at Amazon.com.

## **GETTING LOST IN THE JUNGLE**

One of the greatest boons of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was the advent of the Internet. It literally revolutionized the world in terms of information access and communications, but not the least of which was its impact upon the retail world. Standing as one of the great success stories of the Internet Era is Amazon.com. Amazon sells just about anything that can be sold these days, but it all started with books.

I can remember in the not-too-distant past when people would say, "No one will ever accept buying books over the Internet. You can't take away the book buying enjoyment of going to a bookstore, browsing, and picking out a new book." Oh, how wrong they were. It didn't take too many years for people to realize that hearing that a book was "out of stock" at their local bookstore was an unacceptable answer. As more and more people started figuring out that shopping online was incredibly convenient and cost-effective, they did so by the millions. And what's more, Amazon offered something that even the big chains couldn't: more choice.

Amazon didn't have shelf-space limitations. A listing for a book, along with a description, samples, reviews, the works, all in cyberspace, is just bits and bytes sitting on one of many computer web-servers, which today are no bigger than the average book. Plus, the Internet gave access to hundreds of millions of potential customers from all over the world, not just those of a particular town or community. It worked. It worked so well that it got the attention of all the major bookstore chains. Even they couldn't compete with the market dynamics that Amazon represented. Therefore, Barnes & Noble built their own Internet online bookstore that now competes directly with Amazon's. Borders partnered directly with Amazon to not miss out on a piece of the action. Obviously, even selling bestsellers wasn't enough for the major chains, as most of them now use expensive retail floor space to offer departments for music, movies, computer software, coffee shops, etc.

So now people can buy both the latest bestsellers as well as any other obscure title that's released. If indeed 170,000 new ones come out in a year, Amazon has them, indexed, categorized, and searchable in a database. If the book is in-print, either sitting in a warehouse somewhere, or printed POD upon order, Amazon can sell it and ship it to whoever wants it, just about anywhere on the planet. That's all the good news. The bad news is that there really is such thing as "too much of a good thing." Having access to millions of titles is great if the consumer knows what he's looking for. It's not so great if the consumer just wants to browse.

If you're in the market for a new book, let's say a good murder-mystery, you can easily log onto Amazon and go right to that category and find thousands upon thousands of titles. Wow, where do you start? Let's say your favorite authors have nothing new available, and you've read all their other stuff. Was everyone right in saying that there is just too much stuff available and that you probably ought to just stick with what the industry tells you are the best ones? Most people do. Or might you be willing to take a chance on an unknown product? What if it's a disappointment? What if you pick an inferior book when there was a better one available and you just didn't find it among the thousands to pick from? Even with samples and descriptions and cool looking cover art, how do keep from making a mistake and wasting time and money?

Therefore, from the consumer's standpoint he can pursue one of two paths, either 1) conform and buy what he's effectively told to buy on the New Releases or Bestsellers rack and live with it, which is a decision for limited choices imposed by others, or 2) Face a daunting array of choices in the online universe that risks disappointment. But before we look at how a consumer might make such a choice, let's go back to our discussion of the impact of the Wal-Mart business model on new authors and bring in the Internet factor as well.

## **CENSORSHIP BY DESIGN**

If many of the great authors of our time and throughout history had submitted their work to today's mainstream publishing industry, those authors would have little to show for it other than a stack of form letter rejection slips, and the world would have been deprived of the blessings of their talent. In fact, as a test/practical joke, a while back a group of folks actually took a famous work of literature, a classic, changed it's title and attributed it to a fictitious author's name, put it into manuscript form and sent it out to all the top publishing houses as a new novel to see what would happen. They didn't change a word of the original work. It was universally rejected. Not one of the editors who rejected it did so saying that their rejection was due to the fact that the submission was the plagiarized work of a great American novelist. It was summarily shot down by everyone citing various defects in character or plot or pacing, not the least of which was noting its lack of potential commercial appeal. Go figure!

Likewise, you can routinely read editorial articles in the book section of major newspapers and magazines decrying the talent of bestselling authors like Stephen King, John Grisham, Danielle Steele, et al. I thought the literary world was going to have a collective tantrum and/or nervous breakdown when Stephen King was awarded a lifetime achievement award for his contributions to American Literature. The self-appointed literati hate King. So let's think about this. Those books which academia tells us are the "classics" and true works of art aren't good enough to be published and therefore read by the general public in "bestseller" status, which as we've seen is more a function of the system to exploit preexisting audience bases, i.e. more assigned than merited. And at the same time, those works that do sell by the millions by popular demand we are told by the all-knowing critics are recycled, formulaic crap. So where does that leave anything new? Where does new vision, new insight and new imagination come from?

If you're a new author and have written what you believe is a great book, if no one has ever heard of you, i.e. you're not a celebrity and you don't have some built-in audience base who will run out and buy your book as soon as they hear you've been published, then you have a nearly insurmountable task ahead of you. As you can see, the major publishers, wholesalers, and major chains don't want you—because they don't *need* you. They already have plenty of established names who produce more than enough material to fill all their production slots in a given year. So unless you're sleeping with a NY editor with some serious clout, or have indeed written a novel of such magnitude that it makes the flowers bloom when waved at a barren plain, don't expect New York to embrace your work with open arms. Sure, they let a newcomer in every now and then, but it's the exception not the rule.

So if the New York bestseller route isn't the answer, then your choices really boil down to two: 1) self-publish or 2) go with a smaller, less well-known publisher. In either of these two options, in all likelihood, much of the promotional effort to get people to buy your book will be your responsibility. That's the case with self-publishing by definition, and circumstantially true with small presses due to their typical lack of promotional and distribution resources. But in either case, you have the opportunity to get your work into print and get it out there. If it takes off and finds an audience, and you work to grow and develop that audience, then you might get to the point where larger publishers with greater resources start to see you as no longer a nobody, but someone with an audience, albeit a small and growing one.

For the consumer, I hope something in our discussion here is coming through loud and clear: purely for business and economic reasons, not for artistic reasons and with little to do with the quality of the books, a small fraction of the books that are published each year can ever be found at your local bookstore, whether it be a large chain store or a small independent. All those other books, which perhaps the majority of them are indeed trash, you'll never even see nor have the opportunity to decide for yourself. You could probably find them on Amazon, if you knew to look for them and had any reason to do so. But since you don't know they're there, that's not going to happen. But what if in that group is the next Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Margaret Mitchell, or Saul Bellow, or even authors who wrote purely for commercial success like Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens. Is it alright with you that you're being denied access to that material because whoever wrote it isn't famous yet? Is that type of institutional censorship acceptable?

So what's the alternative? Should you go to Amazon and just start ordering books at random by authors you've never heard of? Of course not. But as a reader, who hopefully reads to expand your knowledge and insight by reading, you do need to be prepared to take some risks and invest a little time reading samples and reviews and giving new books a chance. That won't seem as unreasonable a request when you look at it in the context of the value of your leisure time. You do a lot of things and pay for a lot of things that don't turn out to be the best investment you've ever made. Think of all the movies you've paid to go see, bought the eight dollar tickets, the ten dollars worth of popcorn and drinks, only to be disappointed by the movie. Did you demand your money back from the theater? So you buy a book, and when you're done, it wasn't the next great American novel of all time. Was it enjoyable? Did you pass your time with

it pleurably or was it a piece of trash? In either case you have the opportunity to go to Amazon and record your review of it so the next guy can benefit from your experience. And as more and more people do that, everyone will have more information to use before making their next purchase decision. Inevitably you're going to find good ones in there with the not-so-good ones. But most importantly, you have the power to choose what you want to read, not dictated by a bookstore's finite bestseller policy.

## A NEW WAY TO SKIN THE CAT

For new authors I'd like to challenge you with a whole new concept of how to look at the job of getting your book sold and developing your fan base. It starts with a simple realization. Booksellers are not going to like me saying this, but it doesn't make it any less true. Here it is: Unless your publisher is a leading publisher and your book is going to be promoted as a major lead title, i.e. the bestseller program, then killing yourself trying to get your book into bookstores is the biggest mistake you can ever make. In a very practical way, fighting to get your book into bookstores it's a complete waste of your time.

As we've seen, the entire contemporary bookseller business model is to facilitate the high-volume sales of high-demand books for preexisting large audiences, or to service the demand of the lemmings who only buy what they're told to buy. If you're brand new to the market, then that model doesn't apply to you. In fact, even if you can get a bookseller to stock some of your books in their store, what have you accomplished? Your book is now sitting there in that one store competing with tens of thousands, if not over 100,000 other books, of which those other books are all there because they fit in the bestseller or perennial demand categories. How is anyone going to find your book in the bookstore? Unless it's prominently displayed and/or recommended by store personnel, they won't. It'll just sit there until the bookstore needs the space your book is using and then they'll want to return it for full credit if they've already paid for it. For a new author without a large pre-existing audience, a bookstore represents the place with the highest competition with other works, and the least amount of exclusive focus on your work—translation: one of the worst possible places it could be.

The exception to this is a book signing event at a bookstore. This is an occasion, where for a period of time, your book is on center stage. This is the opportunity to show the bookstore personnel that you have a book that can sell, and hopefully get them to not only stock it, but more importantly to recommend it to people coming in looking for something new.

I know what you're thinking: your book sitting in a bookstore may be one of 50,000 titles, but that's still better odds than being one of however many millions of titles on Amazon. Mathematically, that's true. However, from a practical standpoint, it's pretty much the same—lost in the jungle. When your book isn't being highlighted then there's very little chance anyone will find it who isn't specifically looking for it. It's amazing to me. I tell new authors this all the time, yet virtually without exception the one validating event they all clamor for is to see their book sitting on a shelf at the bookstore. It's seemingly impossible to get new authors to understand that their book sitting in a bookstore—and not just for a short time before being returned for destruction, but because it's either a bestseller or a perennial favorite that the store wants to always keep in stock—is what they get to enjoy *after* they've established a name for themselves, not before. It's not the means to the end they seek—yet that's what is universally assumed.

Many authors also make the mistake of thinking that the best tool at their disposal to help garner attention for their work is a personal website. Embracing this idea is to miss the point by a new order of magnitude. Not only do they desire to build an audience for their books, now they believe that this will come from all the people who visit their website. Oh, wait—people visiting a website *IS* an audience, which also needs to be built from scratch if it doesn't already exist. Contrary to popular belief, setting up a website isn't like opening a store at the Mall, where there is already a lot of foot traffic who will see the new store and

all come check it out. A website is just an address on the Internet that people will find if they know about it beforehand, or find it on a search engine. Said another way, it starts out sitting in as much obscurity as the book you're trying to promote. So does it make any sense to invest time, money and energy in building up an audience for a website in hopes that the website traffic will then help build up the audience for the book? How about just investing all that same time, money, and energy telling everyone you can about the book? Which is easier, developing and audience for one thing or two things? Better yet, start a Blog if you want an Internet presence. They're free and given higher priority by search engines.

Don't misunderstand. Websites are not evil, and in time, as your audience grows, having a common point of reference to find out more about you, new works coming out, public appearances, etc. is all great. But thinking that the website will be the mechanism by which people will discover you and your works in the first place is simply naïve. Other promotional vehicles will work a lot better for you. Press Releases, news pieces, any and all publicity you can get will help build your audience. But the one thing that is most powerful of all, which few think to try is simply: sell your book.

Nothing is as powerful to help further the popularity of a particular title than for people to buy your book, read it, like it, and tell others about it. And if the bookstores don't want to carry it because they've never heard of you, and you don't want to let it languish in obscurity on Amazon.com, then your best alternative is to sell it yourself.

“Quoi? Sell it myself? What are you talking about, Bob?”

I'm talking about going far beyond the link you have on your website to Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com so that your friends, family and coworkers can all buy a copy. This is to sell your book beyond the audience base of those 100 or so people that are physically in your life. I'm talking about becoming a book peddler of your own product—your book. Who is better qualified to do so?

If you've conducted a few book signings, then you already know about dealing with the public, chatting up your book, and getting folks to buy a copy. All I'm suggesting is that you begin finding more and more venues to do this, none of which need to be bookstores, per se. And done right, you'll make more money, and at the same time get more people reading your book who hopefully will like it and recommend it to others.

To illustrate this point I'm going to use one of my own authors, our very own Sara Williams, author of *The Don Juan Con* and *The Serenoa Scandal*, both great suspense novels. Incidentally, *The Don Juan Con* is being produced by Paramount Pictures as a major motion picture, by the legendary Robert Evans himself no less. Anyway, Sara is our poster-child for someone who knows how to get her book out there and selling it. She's done plenty of bookstore book signings at all the major chain stores and independents from one coast to the other. But she's also sold a lot of books at non-bookstore events.

You ought to take a look on the ArcheBooks website ([www.archebooks.com](http://www.archebooks.com)), on the Events page of current and past years author appearance events, and look for Sara's name. You'll discover that she's been at every little arts festival, cow chip toss, manatee roast, and gathering of souls she can find, most of which have little to nothing to do with books. At these community gatherings of 1,000 people or more, Sara usually rents a booth, or finds a way to share one with someone to sell her books. She shows up with a box of books, some bookmarks and promotional material, and off she goes telling anyone who'll stop long enough to listen why they should buy her book. And they do. But what's more, instead of her only making her normal royalties and having a bookstore keep the retail profit over wholesale, she gets all the money.

Let's do the math on that. Her hardcover book *The Don Juan Con* retails for \$24.99. Both she and a retail bookstore buys the book from ArcheBooks Publishing at the standard wholesale discount level of 40% off MSRP, or \$14.99. That means for every book she sells, she makes \$10.00 profit, plus her normal royalties, while at the same time creating new fans and hopefully stimulating interest in her work. Attending four events a month and selling 25 books at each event would generate the sales of 100 books a month, or \$1,000 in income, PLUS royalties. Not a fortune, but not bad extra income for a few hours invested on the weekends. If you did it long enough, in a year's time you might sell 1,000 books or more. Not a bestseller yet, but that would be 1,000 people who bought a copy of your book. If that 1,000 recommended your book to two or three people, and they...well, you've seen the shampoo commercial and know how exponential mathematics works.

If Sara can do it, you can do it, too. It really doesn't take a whole lot more than for you to get yourself a sales tax resale number from your local city hall and find out how much sales tax you also need to collect when you sell a book, then start looking for your community calendar of events, club and civic organization calendars, holiday festivals, whatever, and contacting the event coordinators to see how you can get involved. Talk to your fellow authors in writer's groups and forums and learn of other events in which you can participate. Yes, it's work. Yes, sometimes it can be hard, frustrating, and exhausting. But what's more frustrating than being told No by booksellers or staring at sales reports from online sales that say that few, if any, people are buying your book.

Hey, every author would love to believe that the day their book was accepted for publication meant that they could kick back and start seeing all those great big royalty checks show up in the mailbox, which would pay all the bills while you're busy writing your next book, living a life of artistic leisure like Oscar Wilde, Byron and Shelly. At the point in your writing career that you've established a large enough audience whereby it makes good business sense (high-volume business sense) for a publisher to handsomely compensate you in that manner and take care of all the promotional and distribution details for you, then you can do that. But until that audience is there, you have to go create it, develop it, and maintain it. No one said that would be easy. Hey, if you're already famous in some other walk of life, it may be very easy for you. But if you're not, then you have a long, hard road ahead of you. You may not want to hear that, but it's the truth.

## **BOOKSELLING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, bookselling happens at two distinct levels: the mass-market level, where a preexisting audience of some kind is a non-negotiable requirement, or coming from obscurity whereby you must shoulder the burden of getting your face into the public eye as often as you can and exposing your work to an ever-growing group of people, so that whether it happens quickly or slowly, at some point there is either a uniquely singular event or an accumulation of many small events that results in you going from someone no one has ever heard of to someone many people have heard of. At that point, it won't matter whether people will want to buy your books at a brick and mortar bookstore or online—the customer demand will be there, and that demand is what ultimately drives book sales and prominent availability.

Feel free to genuinely grieve for the days when publishers published books because they really believed they were great books, strong stories, brilliant writing, poignant tales that needed to be told, confident that enough intelligent, literate people would recognize the value of those works and buy enough of them for the publishers to conduct a profitable business enterprise. For the modern mainstream publisher, even a great name is no absolute guarantee of a book's commercial success, but in the eyes of most of them, it's a much safer bet than on some no-name who represents a consumer demand level of zero.

Grieve also for the small local booksellers, the independents and small chains who won't be around much longer if they don't find a way to specialize or differentiate themselves from the major chains. The great irony of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that it's not inconceivable that as the technological revolution continues to evolve, those same big chains who drove all the small booksellers out of business with their Wal-Mart tactics may themselves become a casualty of the Internet generation who rejects the limitations of choice a physical bookstore represents, no matter how big it is, and relishes the freedom and convenience of online shopping. Looking at how Barnes & Noble and Borders have both embraced online book shopping, I don't think they believe it is that absurd a notion either.

Honestly, if you look at how far Print-On-Demand technology has come just in the last five years, it isn't hard to imagine five years from now the ability to have a book printed on demand—while you wait—at a kiosk, eliminating the need for physical bookstores altogether, offering an unlimited choice of titles from millions of books archived in databases. Or if someone ever invents an electronic book reader that offers the same portability and ease of use as a physical book, then individual paper copies of books may indeed one day fulfill the core vision of eBooks, promised for over a decade now, where the books themselves become only computer files. Science Fiction? Not really. Just a matter of time, I think.

And what will constitute a bestseller under those circumstances in the future? It won't be a book printed in millions of copies and stacked high in a store to tell everyone how important it is and that they should buy it. No, at that time, it will only be about the cultivation of an audience and the stimulation of that audience to purchase a copy of something new that interests them, or a new work from a favorite author. Aren't you glad you have from now until then to get your audience built? It also might be a good idea to stop obsessing over a physical point of sale whose days may be numbered.