

Buying Used Books Online: Some Thoughts From a New Seller

A amazon.com is now one of the biggest players in the commercial web; they sell everything under the sun—from computers to sunglasses to shoes to groceries. In my opinion, their biggest moves in the past few years have been in ‘infrastructure as commodity.’ Today, Amazon supports, not just established vendors, but also anyone with a book to offload and a willingness to pay their hefty—but completely deserved—cut.

Having made the decision that I was never going to write the bibliographies I’ve had in mind, and having moved many of my books far too many times, I decided to start culling them. Amazon provides a remarkable structure for doing this, and along the way I’ve learned a lot about how it works and what it means for those who are buying used books online. I’d like to share some of those insights; I hope they’ll be useful.

First, it seems to me that since anyone can try to sell a book online, almost anyone does. As a result, the time for individual selling has almost passed. For example, many popular titles can be bought for a penny, plus shipping, from big online stores. (This isn’t necessarily the best deal, though, as I’ll explain.) For most books, one can find available copies from sellers with hundreds or thousands of positive feedback ratings, so where does that leave the low-volume individual seller?

I see three different types of sellers online: mega-sellers, such as **Better World Books** (<http://www.betterworld.com>), an online site for libraries to resell their discards and their ‘book sale’ books, or **Powell’s Books** (<http://www.powells.com>); well-known maritime bookstores, such as **Columbia Trading Company** (<http://www.columbiatrading.com>) and **Sea Ocean Book Berth** (<http://www.seaoceanbooks.com>); and individual sellers, like me or your cousin Ned. Each approaches selling differently, and your buying experience will differ at each as a result.

For the largest sellers, profit comes through volume. They use software to ensure they’re selling at the lowest price (including just a penny), then earn their profit on the shipping credit. Amazon

collects \$3.99 for shipping and passes most—but not all—to the seller. With large shipping contracts, companies can mail books for much, much less. In fact, you’ll find the same title offered for a penny plus shipping at Amazon, while Better World Books sells it, perhaps, for \$2 with free shipping. If you’re just searching for a ‘reading copy’ of something, the mega-sellers may be the way to go.

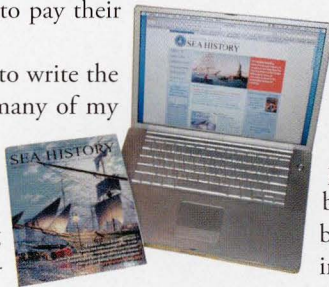
The biggest problem with the large sellers is that they generally offer only generic book descriptions because they don’t have the time/personnel to write about each book. Maritime bookstores should be your preferred choice for the best quality because they’re very familiar with their inventory, have a reputation to uphold, and want your future business.

Then there are the little guys, like me. I’m trying to provide clear, accurate descriptions of my books, since I can’t offer the positive feedback history that the others have built up over time and through high-volume sales. I don’t aim to offer the cheapest books, though most of the ones I’ve sold were the cheapest when the sale was made. It adds up to an interesting balancing act.


When you’re looking to buy a used book at Amazon, the first thing to consider is how nice a book you want. If you just want a reading copy of a very popular title, see what the cheapest offer is, then check if that mega-seller sells it on their own site for less—include shipping costs in your calculations. For a higher quality copy, I recommend looking at individual descriptions. Note that Amazon’s condition reports are frustrating—individual sellers often list lousy ex-library copies or heavily marked books as “Collectible.” Most times, you can find an as-good or better copy for less in the “Used” section than you’ll find in “Collectible.”

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at shipindex@yahoo.com. See <http://www.shipindex.org> for a compilation of over 100,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals.

—Peter McCracken



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