

Brave New Publishing World

When my first book was published a dozen years ago, I felt like I'd hit the big time when it was listed for sale on Amazon.com. That was before it became apparent that even the failed efforts of a million monkeys on a million typewriters would be listed on Amazon, no questions asked.

Today, many writers wish they could escape from the massive e-tailer as easily as they had become attached. Amazon is starting to resemble an e-company store, where authors continue to do business simply because they have no other choice.

Over the summer, Amazon was flexing its muscles, seeking to wring even greater discounts from its suppliers. But Hachette Book Group, one of the world's five largest publishers, dug in its heels. Amazon responded by discouraging customers from buying Hachette titles and, if the customer persisted, filled the order without its usual sense of urgency. Hachette authors cried out in protest, at which point Amazon asked them to shush, assuring one and all that it had their best interests at heart.

Scorned authors and Twitter can be a dangerous mix. Amazon was soon being compared to Vladimir Putin, and not favorably. "Like all repressive regimes, Amazon wants to completely control your access to books," tweeted Sherman Alexie, an American Book Award winner. Authors from Stephen King to Nora Roberts signed a public letter reprimanding the e-tailer.

But while the publishers dismayed of Amazon's market manipulation, they were quite happy with Apple.

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According to government lawyers, Apple engineered a price-fixing scheme that would have pegged the minimum price of an e-book at \$12.99—\$3 above the going Amazon rate. That effort ended with a settlement with the Justice Department in June.

For authors, these developments appear to be a no-win, with Amazon suppressing prices and the Justice Department understandably frowning on efforts to prop them up. Those who make a living in media have generally been told to get used to these new, unfortunate truths — sorry about your luck, but it's a new electronic day.

Maybe. But more likely, there are still a few chapters to be written before we know how the book industry is going to shake out.

A little-noticed sideline of Amazon called CreateSpace produces physical books at minimal cost. Publishers shudder to think what might happen if Amazon itself becomes a major publisher, but Amazon should shudder if authors decide they don't need publishers or e-tailers, either one.

Just a decade ago, anyone interested in publishing a book had to pay thousands of dollars up front and manage an inventory consisting of thousands of copies; it simply wasn't cost efficient to do otherwise. Today that's not true. Books are virtually as cheap to make by the box as they are by

the pallet. Thanks in part to enterprises like CreateSpace, an unknown or regionally popular author can make and sell 100 books locally at a nice little profit—ignoring Amazon and its 55 percent cut off an already discounted book.

E-books are changing the market even more. Established authors and publishers might find it more efficient to turn their backs on Amazon and sell directly to their readers, who will be quite capable of keeping up on their favorite author's latest work without Amazon's help.

Some curious market dynamics are already in play. Regional authors have gained a national following by, for example, giving away 10,000 e-books free of charge. Crazy as it might sound, if the author is talented, this largesse can translate into exponential sales down the road. Others have taken advantage of "virtual book tours" put together by a myriad of online book clubs across the country. The author writes a blog item or answers a few questions for the group without having to leave the sofa.

It is true that the days of \$35 hardback tomes, when tweed-upholstered authors and publishers celebrated their latest contracts over cognac and cigars, are dying. That's bad for a select few. Celebrity authors will still be with us, naturally, but they will face greater competition. The world of the successful novelist will no longer be an exclusive club where publishers and agents decide in a three-minute meeting whether an author survives or is fed to the lions. New, independent authors are not guaranteed success by any means, but today they have potentially lucrative options created by a greatly expanded marketplace.

And lest we forget, no one stands to benefit more from these industry changes than the gentle reader, whose options have escalated in the same manner that cable television freed us from the Big Three networks.

The sheer enormity of Amazon and the major publishers certainly makes them seem unbeatable. But a book by the name of *Gulliver's Travels* teaches us never to ignore the might of creative and determined midgets. **R**

