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10 June 2002

A Yankee Takeover?

The whisper that the new sponsors of the Booker Prize for Fiction, the Man Group, might be considering opening it up to American authors has caused a furore in British literary circles. Lisa Jardine, chair of this year's Booker panel, declared that it will make the award 'blandly generic' and

said: 'With someone like Roth at his best, I can't see how an Amis or a McEwan would touch them.' But the contrary view was expressed by Jonathan Yardley, writing in *the Guardian*: 'apart from Bellow, I can think of only four American novelists – Michael Chabon, Gail Godwin, Craig Nova and Anne Tyler – whose work could be submitted to an international competition with any confidence. The rest is assembly-line product, each as indistinguishable from any other as one Ford Mondeo from another, self-referential and self-absorbed, technically competent but thematically empty or banal.'

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1 June 2002

Reading Fiction is Being Squeezed out of Our Lives

A rather dismal recent UK survey of reading habits carried out by Book Marketing for Orange has revealed that the time pressures of modern life are eroding the time spent on reading fiction, which is likely to be a stronger trend in the United States. Although fiction sales are growing by 4% a year, even the 60% of people who do read books are spending less and less time doing so. The average daily breakdown of time spent shown by the study is as follows:

- 11 minutes on reading fiction
- 8 minutes on non-fiction and reference
- 22 minutes on newspapers/magazines
- **making 48 minutes in total on reading**
- but this is dwarfed by:
- 3.5 hours on watching tv
- 3 hours on listening to the radio (perhaps combined with another activity)

Book sales are up 25% since 1990, but there seems to be strong evidence that **people simply don't have the time to read all the books they buy**, with longer working hours and competing claims for leisure time pushing book-reading into weekends and holidays. Women spend more time reading books than men and account for 70% of the books that are read, with some evidence from other studies that they regard reading novels as their private indulgence. It's comforting for writers that book purchases are increasing, but worrying that so many books seem to be piling up unread.

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27 May 2002

Hawking Disputes Audio Publisher's Book Rights

Two collections of essays by the distinguished scientist Stephen Hawking are at the centre of a legal dispute involving the publisher New Millennium. It appears that the audio rights in **Universe in a Nutshell** and **Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays** were sold some time ago to Michael Viner at Dove Audio. This deal, agreed before Professor Hawking became a bestselling author, gave the right to publish in 'written form the text of the said recording'. Now that Michael Viner has done just that through his new company New Millennium and published, highly successfully, a transcript of one of the collections in book form, Hawking has complained to the FTC and New Millennium has now also filed a complaint.

Al Zuckerman, President of Writers' House and Hawking's agent, described the deal with Viner as 'an audio contract that says he has the right to print a transcript of the audio. At the time we made the deal in 1988 Viner was an audio publisher and **it never occurred to me in my wildest dreams that the right to print a transcript of an audio would give him the right to print a book**'. The case rumbles on and highlights the importance of looking carefully at the small print of any contract. Even a seemingly innocuous agreement should be treated with care as, if the author is subsequently very successful, this may well give their early work great commercial value.

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20 May 2002

Gone with the Wind Copyright Battle ends with a Whimper

What the *Boston Globe* has described as 'the most contentious copyright battle in recent memory' (see [News Review](#) dated 29 April 2001 and 11 June 2001) has just ended rather inconclusively, as the Mitchell Trusts, representing the heirs of Margaret Mitchell, gave up the legal fight to block publication of **The Wind Done Gone**. Alice Randall's parody had reinterpreted **Gone with the Wind** from the point of view of Scarlett's black slave half-sister. The novel is to be published with a label calling it 'an unauthorized parody'.

If you believe that an author should have full copyright protection for their

work, including the plot and characters they have created, you may feel that this outcome is unsatisfactory in protecting authors' rights. But if you think that Alice Randall's work was giving voice to another view of Mitchell's mythic novel, you may feel that her parody should be fully available. **Gone with the Wind** is indubitably Margaret Mitchell's copyright, but has its importance as an interpretation of the American Civil War from the white plantation-owner's perspective given it some other, iconic status? And does this justify publication of Alice Randall's reinterpretation to 'set the record straight' or is she trying to cash in on the earlier book's huge success?

More Debate on American Book Sales

Following on from last week's report about book sales trends in the UK and US, there has been further discussion of prospects for the US book business, but little agreement on where things are heading. Michael Cader, industry commentator and editor of the industry newsletter *Publishers' Lunch*, is disposed to take a gloomy view: 'With record numbers of new books published every year, a more liquid market for used books online, fewer books going out of print thanks to print-on-demand technology, and overall unit sales stagnant or even declining, the mathematical collision is disastrous – lower sales for all but a few titles.'

But other commentators, including Patricia Schroeder, President of the Association of American Publishers, disagrees: 'We have been getting statistics that we send out every month that we hardly believe. They are so good.'

Perhaps these differing views reflect different timescales looking forward. In the end no-one really knows whether current trends will continue or go into reverse. But 135,000 new books published in 2001 in the US is a very large number, so the sheer growth in output must be having some effect. September 11th had a catastrophic impact on fall 2002 book sales and perhaps one of its longer-term after-effects has been a loss of confidence in the future of the book business.

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13 May 2002

Book Sales up in UK but Predicted down in US

According to the latest Book Marketing Ltd figures, consumer spending on books in the UK rose by 5% in 2001 and unit sales were up from 336 million to 345 million, an increase of 3%. Growth came mostly from paperback fiction and non-fiction bought for adults. However, in spite of the 'Harry Potter effect', unit sales of children's books fell for the fourth year running, from 109 million to 104 million.

This relatively positive set of figures is in contrast to the US, where the Book Industry Study Group has just predicted that the total number of units sold (across all book segments) will fall from 2.41 billion in 2001 to 2.39 billion in 2002. This figure takes all domestic book sales into account, but 2001 was in any case a poor year in the US book trade. An economic slowdown in the early part of the year was followed by the body-blow of 11th September. Looking forward, the current view is that there will be 2% growth in consumer spending on books in 2002, but that there will be no significant improvement for the book trade until 2004.

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6 May 2002

Boom-time for Writers and Readers

Publishers have just gathered in New York for American publishing's biggest annual convention, BookExpo America, which the *New York Times* has described as 'the Super Bowl of book promotion, where publishers battle to influence what stores promote and what customers ultimately read.' But recent reports suggest that the real book boom that is currently going on is not in bookselling, but in creative writing courses and reading groups.

Students Choose Creative Writing

There's been spectacular growth in creative writing programmes, with colleges in the US rushing to offer the writing courses that students are demanding. Currently more than 320 colleges and universities offer these classes and around 240 have established creative writing MFA programmes. There's huge demand, with many students seeing themselves as future Hemingways or even Jean Auels. The courses are very focused on actual writing, rather than theory, although only a few students will actually make it in terms of a professional writing career. But, as Susan Hubbard, Associate Professor of English at the University of Central Florida, says: 'you can never take away from a writer the feeling of accomplishment that comes from having crafted a solid story, novel or poem. The pride in creation, to me, is the real reason why students are gravitating towards this field.'

Books or Dates?

Meanwhile, in the UK, the *Telegraph* has suggested another reason – other than the love of books – for the boom in reading groups in the UK, now said to number more than 50,000. They're said by dating experts to be perfect for 'speed-dating', offering the opportunity to meet twenty or

so new people in any evening. Since many of the most successful reading groups are largely female, very stable and quite serious about the books (although everyone also enjoys a sociable evening), most reading group members are likely to find this description rather wide of the mark.

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29 April 2002

Author Makes it into Print

Writing recently in the London *Sunday Times*, columnist Godfrey Smith tells a wonderful story of an author's success against all the odds. Carl Tighe was a young writer who had done everything from gutting fish to cleaning mental hospital toilets. Offered a job teaching English in Poland, he couldn't believe his luck and, during the years from the birth of Solidarity to the imposition of martial law in Poland, he recorded everything he saw around him, every joke, hardship and anecdote

All this rich raw material later went into a first novel, which he sent out to over 30 publishers, all of whom rejected it as too uncommercial. It seemed like the end of the line for his manuscript, but Tighe was lucky in that his landlady Madeleine Rose believed in the book and put up £1,000 to publish it under her own imprint. Out of a tiny initial print of 300 copies, 50 went to reviewers, but not a single review appeared. She sent one copy to the Whitbread review panel and they shortlisted it. Another copy went to the Authors' Club for their best first novel award and Godfrey Smith gave it the prize. Against all the odds, Carl Tighe's **Burning Worm**, now written up in Smith's highly influential *Sunday Times* column, is going to make it.

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22 April 2002

Writers Guild Battles with Amazon on Used Books

The used book debate is hotting up. After Jeff Bezos of Amazon sent an email to thousands who had sold second-hand books through the online retailer, over 4,000 of them emailed the Writers Guild of America. As expressed by Nick Turner, the President of the Guild, its view was that:

'We're not against Amazon's selling used books, or used book sales generally. We're against Amazon's selling 'used' (frequently new copies sent out for review) books on the same page as new ones. It's disingenuous to trumpet Amazon's concern for authors by saying that used books sales encourage readers to experiment with authors and genres and that this in turn encourages new book sales. Used books might

do that, but Amazon's way of selling them does not. That's because readers so encouraged, finding their way to the page displaying an author's newest book, will see a box offering it used for less than the new one. If Amazon were truly concerned about authors, **it simply would stop offering used books on the same pages as new ones.**'

According to Internet correspondent M J Rose, who had spoken to a number of authors who were Guild members, not all of them supported this stance. But the public view is that, once they have bought a book at a 'new' price, it is theirs to dispose of as they wish, including selling it on to someone else, and that they would like books to be as cheap as possible. This ties in with Amazon's sales policy, which seems to be to sell whatever they can sell profitably online and to attract purchasers through price promotions.

Used book sales through Amazon amount to a tiny proportion of overall book sales. There doesn't seem to be any workable way of ensuring that the author gets a share of this market, so it looks as if authors will have to comfort themselves with the hope that used book sales will help to extend their readership.

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15 April 2002

Was Frazier right to go for the money?

The case of Charles Frazier has been causing much debate in publishing circles, particularly in New York. Frazier is the author of the 1998 Civil War bestseller **Cold Mountain**, which was published by the well-respected literary firm Grove Atlantic, received wonderful reviews and went on to sell 2.8 million copies in the US, as well as becoming an international bestseller. But now Frazier has accepted the lure of a huge advance and has moved with his new book to Random House for a rumoured \$5 million.

The head of Grove Atlantic, Morgan Entrekin, did everything he could to acquire Frazier's second novel, but the author's new agent asked for sealed bids and in the end Grove Atlantic, a medium-sized independent publisher, simply did not have such a deep pocket as the Bertelsmann-owned Random House. Emphasising the importance to all publishers of the big bestsellers, Entrekin said: 'The success we enjoyed with the (first) book made it possible for Grove Atlantic to thrive as an independent publisher over the last five years.' Charles Frazier obviously found the decision to go to Random House a hard one to make and he has been widely criticised for his mercenary approach. However many in the author community will defend his right to sell his work as he pleases and for the highest price possible.

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8 April 2002

Bookseller sells books on demand

The future has arrived at Books Express in Cambridge, Ontario, where customers can buy books which are then printed for them, using an in-store print on demand facility. Instabook Canada has a counter in the store and it takes just five minutes to produce each volume by downloading the file from the computer, printing the pages, trimming and binding the paperback books. Audrey McNeill, the first customer to use this new facility, bought a two-volume set of **Adam Bede** by George Eliot and **Agnes Gray** by Anne Bronte for her daughter's birthday and was pleased with her purchases, which cost only slightly more than they would have done in ordinary paperback editions: 'The books weren't available in the store.. I wanted to get something personalized... My daughter was thrilled,' she said.

The Instabook range currently consists of 650 titles, mostly classics. Naturally the print on demand facility would be more attractive to book buyers if more titles were available, but publishers, having been 'burned' by the lack of demand for e-books, are likely to move only cautiously to make their titles available for print on demand purchase.

In spite of early expectations that print on demand would immediately change the way publishing and bookselling works, publishers have been slow to adopt the new technology. Offering as it does the possibility of printing each book on demand at the point of sale, ie the bookstore, it has radical implications for publishers and booksellers, although both groups may well be feeling wary when other components of the technological revolution have so singularly failed to deliver the anticipated payback. But in-store print on demand would enable the book business to slash the cost of unsold books by offering the book-buyer sample books on display, which could then be printed for the customer as required. Daniel O'Brien of Forester Research has forecast that print on demand books will be a \$3.9 billion market by 2005 and that with consumer e-books they will constitute \$7 to \$8 billion of sales, which would be 17.5% of the US publishing industry.

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25 March 2002

Authors Lose out the Second Time around

The well-known web author and journalist MJ Rose, in her column for

Wired.com, has drawn attention to the growing threat to authors' income posed by the spread of secondhand book sales via the Internet. Although there has always been a market for used books, more aggressive selling through eBay and Amazon has seen them listed next to new copies, with an obvious price advantage to lure buyers. But for the author this is bad news, since used book sales do not figure in publishers' figures and, if they displace new book sales, the author will not get the benefit of earning any royalties.

The War of Greene's Comma

A literary war has broken out between the custodians of Graham Greene's papers, in support of his authorised biographer, Norman Sherry, and other writers needing access to the papers, whose right to see them is supported by members of Greene's family, the custodians of his estate. A large proportion of Greene's writings are held by the Lauinger Library at Georgetown University in Washington and the library has made it clear that it believes Greene's wish was that Norman Sherry should have first access. His son, Francis Greene, says that; 'Graham gave his papers for the good of the scholarship of the readers of the world and they have been withheld from everybody.'

Greene's final statement, signed two days before his death in April 1991, says: 'I Graham Greene grant permission to Norman Sherry, my authorised biographer, excluding any other to quote from my copyright material published or unpublished.' **Before he signed the document, Greene inserted a comma** between 'other ' and 'to', supposedly changing the meaning to suggest that, although Sherry was the sole authorised biographer (which is not contested), the question of whether others should be allowed access to the papers is left open. This debate could run and run.

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18 March 2002

How to Get Published

The **How to Get Published** conference, sponsored by the *Daily Mail* at the **London Book Fair**, drew a capacity audience of 450 writers, who took part in a series of sessions involving an agent, a publisher, four authors and three booksellers. The writers attending the conference were mostly very focused on the mechanics of getting published, putting forward questions such as how to present your material, how long the synopsis should be and how to get an agent. [Carole Blake](#) of Blake Friedmann, the author of **From Pitch to Publication**, estimated that her agency takes on only around eight new authors a year, even though the agency may, partly because of her book and her participation in events such as this one, get **up to 50 unsolicited manuscripts submitted in a single day**. Amanda Ridout, MD of HarperCollins General Division, thought that around **20% of authors published by her division in the**

last two years were first-timers. All the speakers emphasised the importance of new authors to the publishing industry.

The authors taking part had a great deal of useful advice to offer. Both Mike Gayle and Lisa Jewell emphasised the importance of rewriting. Mike Gayle said that you have to write because you really want to, that you should **get friends to comment on your work** and that it was important to have the **right agent**; **'You don't want to be represented by someone who doesn't understand what you're writing'**.

Magnus Mills, the former bus driver and author of **The Restraint of Beasts**, gave an amusing account of his own sudden rise to fame, including the fact that his occupation had given his publisher an unbeatable publicity angle. Joanne Harris, the author of **Chocolat**, gave a powerful but modest account of her rise to writing success, via two early unsuccessful novels which she had lost the rights to. All the authors spoke of the importance of rewriting and pointed out that you needed persistence to get published.

The conference was good-humoured and constructive. **There is a great gulf between unpublished writers 'out there' and the publishing business, often seen by the writers as inward-looking and difficult to penetrate.** The writers I spoke to felt that this event was a useful first step in helping writers to work out just how to get to grips with the task of getting their work published.

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11 March 2002

Quiet Growth in E-Books

With the hype about the e-book revolution now seeming quaintly old-fashioned and big publishers such as **Time Warner and Random House scaling back their e-publishing ventures**, it's easy to assume that e-books are a complete failure, part of the collapse of the dot-com dream. However, the truth is that **a market for e-books is quietly developing.** US publishers such as Simon and Schuster, HarperCollins and St Martin's Press have achieved at least 10% growth over the last year. At the more dedicated end of the market, Fictionwise.com now offers more than 1,000 titles and has 30,000 members. Palm, which has a strong interest in developing this market to create demand for its hand-held reading devices, claims to have sold nearly 180,000 e-books in 2001 and to be acquiring 1,000 new customers a week.

Big publishers may have found that e-publishing is not going to take off in the way they had originally predicted, but they are still concerned about the outcome of the Random House v Rosetta Books appeal (see News Reviews 29, 27 and 17 for earlier reports on this story). If digital rights are not implicit in book contracts, then the e-book rights in a vast number of backlist titles will be up for grabs. The big publishers know their

expectations of the e-book market were wildly over-optimistic, but they don't think the market's gone away either, and they don't want to find another company exploiting 'their' backlist.

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4 March 2002

Copyright freedom in the Internet age

The US Supreme Court is to hear an obscure copyright case which will bring centre-stage the issues relating to freedom in the Internet age. **The case involves what has been disparagingly referred to as the 'Mickey Mouse Protection Act'**, i.e. the 1998 law which extended copyright for 20 years, and concerns the question of whether the US Congress exceeded its authority in making that extension. The US constitution authorises the granting of copyright 'for limited times', but just how 'limited' might this be, and does 20 years exceed this?

Now that the Internet has made it so easy to use and propagate copyrighted property, the issues this will **raise are right at the centre of debates about intellectual freedom**. This was first brought to public attention by the group of academics led by Professor Boyle of Duke University, who argued that attempts to define copyright ever more tightly and restrictively amount to a 'second enclosure movement' and must be resisted as an attempt to control ideas which should be in the public domain (see [Scientists Rebel](#)).

The case to be heard by the Supreme Court relates to this. Lawrence Lessig, the celebrated legal theorist of the Internet, recently wrote in *Wired* magazine: **'If the internet teaches us anything, it is that great value comes from leaving core resources in a commons, where they are free to build on as people see fit.** We are now corrupting this core, and this corruption will in turn destroy the opportunity for creativity that the Internet built.'

This extremely important case raises issues which will affect not just academics, but also authors, artists, musicians, scientists, and the publishing, music and entertainment industries. The need to redefine copyright protection in the age of mass information will have to be balanced against the requirement for a free flow of ideas to fuel future innovation. This promises to be a fascinating debate.

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25 February

Online Sales Steady but not Spectacular

Recent figures from Goldman Sachs show that **US online sales grew by between 20% and 25% to \$32bn in 2001**. These figures do not match the heady expectations of online sales which fuelled the huge investment in online retailers in 2000. However they do show that money can be made out of selling on the Internet if you are either better at it, or have a good combination of 'clicks and mortar', where retail stock and existing fulfilment systems can support selling online.

Online shoppers are showing themselves to be strongly driven by price, which is not surprising when price comparisons are so easy to make on the Internet. Early hopes that those buying online would be prepared to pay premium prices have been dashed and online retailers are having to compete on price, rather as they do in direct mail.

This is why Amazon's approach is now 'everyday low pricing' and they have responded to their customers' desire for free shipping by offering this on orders worth more than \$99. However the US, as the most mature Internet sales market, shows little sign of developing a real mass market online, as had been anticipated would happen as Internet access broadened to different demographic groups.

People seem to be using the Internet for different things, gathering information being one of them. Perhaps going shopping is just too much fun. Why cut out an activity which you positively enjoy and which enables you to see what you buy before you buy it?

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18 February

Follow my Leader

A leader in the this week's *Bookseller* comments on that well-known publishing rule relating to copycat publishing: **books which set out to jump on a bestselling bandwagon never sell as well as the original book**. Tariq Ali, in a reference to the success of *Cod*, said : 'The bloody book on salmon never works'.

He is echoing many in the industry who have observed that the sales departments' desire to publish next year more of whatever made it to the bestseller lists last year is fatally flawed. The very fact that the first book did so well means that the next one won't.

Public taste does change and readers do get bored with the same thing, however successful it has been in the past. Delia Smith, generally seen by everyone in the British book trade as a 'banker', has just sold 100,000 fewer copies to date of *How to Cook: Book Three* than of previous volumes. The tie-in to the third series of *Absolutely Fabulous*, assumed by everyone in the book trade to be a dead cert, has

been shown to be just a dead book – and so it goes on.

Taking a more positive approach to all this, one could applaud the fact that book-buyers are exercising choice and discrimination. In spite of the best that publishers' marketing departments can do to promote the books that have been selected for the bestseller hype, a bad book won't sell.

Word-of-mouth is still an irresistible force, as the huge success of books such as *Wild Swans* and *Cold Mountain* have shown. **The book business would do well to remember that readers are fickle and opinionated, as they have every right to be, and cannot be force-fed with a diet of pre-digested bestsellers.**

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11 February

Chicago chooses famous Holocaust novel

As the second book in its *One Book, One Chicago* programme, Chicago Public Library has chosen Elie Wiesel's **Night**, a powerful novel which draws on the author's own terrible experiences in the Nazi death camps. Wiesel, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, was born in what is now Romania and was deported to Auschwitz in 1944. The author will visit Chicago in April to take part in discussions about the book.

Night is the second novel to be chosen by the Chicago Public Library for this programme. The first was Harper Lee's **To Kill a Mocking-Bird**. The idea of a whole city reading one book was first tried in Seattle in 1998 and has now been adapted by 40 cities in the US. The intention is that people should read the book and then gather to discuss it. To date, this has been very successful as a way of encouraging people to read and to focus on books.

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28 January

Amazon – success at last or just another damp squib?

Amazon this week announced that it has reached its goal of making a profit in the fourth quarter of 2001, with an operating profit of \$14.5m on sales of \$1.1bn for the quarter. **This was achieved with the help of a \$16m gain related to the fall in value of the Euro.**

The news has sparked off a debate about what this profit figure means. John Cassidy, whose book **Dot.Con: The Greatest Story Ever Sold**, is published this month by Penguin Press in the UK, says that, by trading only a small proportion of its shares, Amazon kept the valuation of the

company high. Writing in the *New York Times*, Cassidy pointed out that 'It was the media that transformed Amazon.com from an interesting small business story into a multibillion dollar corporate thriller' – with all the unending media speculation that has surrounded it ever since. The *Independent* provided a negative view on the profit news, pointing out that it is 'going to take an awfully long time to earn back the \$3bn in capital the company has gobbled up'.

Some commentators greeted this as good news for the whole Internet sector and in the UK the *Daily Telegraph* hailed it as a sign of a **healthy book market no longer hampered by the Net Book Agreement**. It argues that since the end of the NBA 'far more books are published, bought, and perhaps even read than in the old days, while independent shops have burgeoned.' This is not a picture which would be recognised by everyone in the British book trade. Independent bookshops in particular feel themselves to be very much under pressure from the burgeoning power of the chains.

Although now discounting much less ferociously than in the past, Amazon has played a major part in fostering a competitive book retailing market which relies heavily on discounting bestsellers. Some commentators have pointed out that this has put margins under pressure throughout the trade book business. **High discount sales usually also mean that the author receives a lower royalty, so authors are also affected by the way in which Amazon has redrawn the bookselling map.**

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21 January

Would you ban these books?

The *Christian Science Monitor* has recently published a rather sobering list of the books noted by the American Library Association as the most frequently 'challenged' during 2000. It's mostly an extraordinary mixture of children's books (thought elsewhere to be helpfully encouraging children to read) and literary novels, which deal with major issues of our time:

1. Harry Potter series, by J.K. Rowling, for occult/Satanism and antifamily themes.
2. The Chocolate War, by Robert Cormier, for violence and offensive language.
3. Alice series, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, for sexual content.
4. Killing Mr. Griffin, by Lois Duncan, for violence and sexual content.
5. Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck, for using offensive language, racism, and violence.
6. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou, for being too explicit in the book's portrayal of rape and other sexual abuse.
7. Fallen Angels, by Walter Dean Myers, for offensive language, racism, and violence.

8. Scary Stories series, by Alvin Schwartz, for violence and occult themes.
9. The Terrorist, by Caroline Cooney, for negatively portraying the Islamic religion and Arabs.
10. The Giver, by Lois Lowry, for being sexually explicit, having occult themes, violence.

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14 January

UK Fiction Sales Shrink

According to a recent study by Book Marketing Ltd, **fiction sales in the UK have fallen by about 10% in the last 18 months.** Hardback sales have continued to decline and now account for only 17% of all fiction titles sold, or 26% of the total by value.

There is also little sign that discounting, even of bestsellers, is having the effect of encouraging more purchases, as the book trade had hoped. **'It does not appear that discounting has had either a positive or a negative effect on the overall level of hardback fiction sales,'** the report comments.

Perhaps discounting is tending to encourage book-buyers to buy the heavily-discounted books, rather than leading them to buy more fiction overall. **So the publishers' and bookselling chains' view that discounting is about securing their own market share may be right after all,** but the cost to the book trade as a whole is wafer-thin margins and an unstable market. The sudden announcement last week that James Thin, one of Scotland's oldest-established booksellers, had gone into receivership, is the kind of unwelcome news that 2002 may hold in store.

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7 January

A Christmas Book Boom in the UK; Sales Flat in the US

A **£30 million last-minute surge** in book sales in the week before Christmas made this a bumper year for UK booksellers. Cumulative sales for the year to 22 December had fallen by 5% on the previous year, but a sudden leap in retail sales in general in the last week before the holiday boosted book sales for the whole year. This is in line with consumer purchasing, which has remained relatively strong through the autumn and into the January sales.

In the US the picture was less rosy, with most bookstores reporting sales flat or slightly down on 2000. The disappointing sales were

attributed to the poor economy and the after-effects of 11 September, but many commentators thought that even flat sales were welcome in what has been a very poor year for book sales. Many of the big fall books, including the fiction bestseller 'bankers', sold disastrously, and there is continuing uncertainty in the book world about when the world's largest economy will come out of recession - and what kind of 2002 the book business can expect.

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1 January

E-book lives on

A piece on *Wired* suggests that the death of the e-book has been exaggerated. E-book reading and sales are stronger than ever with independent publishers and retailers such as Fictionwise.com, Booklocker.com, Hardshell Word Factory and Palm Digital Corp reporting sales increases in 2001 from between 100% and 400%. **"What hasn't worked is heavily invested companies** -- such as iPublish and MightyWords -- setting overly optimistic expectations. But what has worked, albeit on a smaller scale, is selling quality work from recognised authors (Palm or Fictionwise), or offering readers niche titles that they are interested in reading (Hard Shell and Booklocker)."

But *Mighty Words* to Close

Yet another e-publishing venture is coming to an end, as MightyWords CEO Chris MacAskill served official 30-day notice of termination to content providers. MacAskill says, "We regret to inform you that we have made the difficult decision to cease operations effective January 12, 2002."

The site offers only slight more details; while distribution partners are encouraged to investigate becoming BN.com affiliates, the FAQ tells content providers wondering "Whom do I speak with at BN.COM to sell my digital titles?" that "We do not have contact information."

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Chris Holifield

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