

The Home-Based Bookstore

**Start Your Own Business Selling Used Books
on Amazon, eBay or Your Own Web Site**



Steve Weber
www.WeberBooks.com

The Home-Based Bookstore

**Start Your Own Business Selling Used Books
on Amazon, eBay or Your Own Web Site**

By Steve Weber

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Warning and Disclaimer

This book describes the author's experiences selling used books online. It is offered with the understanding that it does not contain legal, financial, or other professional advice. Individuals requiring such services should consult a competent professional.

Although every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the contents of this book, errors and omissions may occur. The publisher assumes no responsibility for any damages arising from the use of this book, or alleged to have resulted in connection with this book.

This book is not completely comprehensive. Some readers may wish to consult additional books and advice before making decisions about establishing a business or changing their current business practices. Additional sources of information are identified in the appendices of this book.

This booklet previews the first two chapters of "The Home-Based Bookstore." To buy the complete book, see <http://www.weberbooks.com/book.htm>

Why Online Bookselling?

Selling used books on the Internet is one of the greatest opportunities available to small entrepreneurs today. Used book sales on the Internet jumped 33 percent in 2004. Now, one of every 12 books sold is a used book, and two-thirds of those are purchased online from small businesses — with total annual sales of \$609 million.

You can be part of this expanding market. For less than \$100, you can launch an Internet bookselling business with profit margins rivaling those of any business. Exactly how much money you earn depends mostly on how much effort you put into your new enterprise.

If you're already employed, you can begin your book business as a part-time venture, as I did five years ago. If the profits from bookselling grow bigger than your paycheck (it took three months for me), you can quit your job and enjoy one of the most rewarding experiences of your life: building a thriving business from scratch.

Nothing is more empowering than building your own business to support yourself and your family, and perhaps no line of work is more highly regarded than bookselling. Sellers of used books help build a better world by preserving and spreading knowledge. The used-book trade helps our communities by conserving re-

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sources, reducing the waste going to landfills, and making books more affordable.

You don't need a store or a warehouse or delivery trucks to sell used books. You don't need an MBA or inside connections with wholesalers or drop-shippers. You needn't be an expert on books, though a fondness for books will surely help. The only requirements are a willingness to learn and a commitment to running an honest business.

You can start small – with the books on your own shelf – and you can invest your profits in new inventory and expand at your own pace. No business is better suited for the one-person company than used bookselling. If you'd like to earn just a few hundred dollars a month to supplement your current income, you can keep the enterprise a part-time job. If you want to take four months off during the year, you can. If you want to go full-time, it's certainly possible to earn more than \$40,000 a year working on your own.

I started selling books on the Internet in 2001 after discovering the Web site Half.com. I listed a couple dozen of my unwanted books for sale and was amazed to see how quickly they sold. I couldn't wait to find new books to list. Impulsively, I withdrew \$80 from my meager savings to buy four bags of used paperbacks from a local shop. Several of the books turned out to be worthless, but one book sold immediately for \$23, and within a few days, I had doubled my \$80 investment after selling just half of those books. I was hooked.

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That weekend, I hauled a carload of books home from a library sale and worked straight through the weekend listing them on the Internet. I quit my job two months later and never looked back. In the meantime, I've sold books worth a total of \$1 million to 80,000 customers in all 50 states and 31 foreign countries. With the profits I've paid off my debts and moved from a cramped one-bedroom apartment to a nice house. And all of it came from the \$80 I spent on that first batch of books and the urge to see what was possible.

All this was impossible a few years ago. To be a used bookseller before recent innovations, you had to first assemble 10,000 to 20,000 books. You needed to lease retail space. You needed employees. You had to pay through the nose to advertise, and then you would pray some customers showed up with money in hand. If something went sufficiently wrong, you lost your shirt.

Today, you can market instantly to a worldwide pool of millions of ready buyers — even as a beginning used bookseller. You don't need to advertise, and participating in this growing network costs you nothing until you make your sales.

Used books are the perfect merchandise to sell online for several reasons:

- Books are easy to find at low cost.
- Books are standardized items that are simple to describe and sell.
- Books are compact, non-fragile, and easy to ship.

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- Most used books are worth less than \$20, and so bookselling attracts few of the thieves and scam artists that plague most online ventures.

This is an excellent time to get into online book-selling too. Every day new buyers are discovering they can get a used book at a great price online. People who never thought of buying a used book before are discovering the great value, convenience, and selection available through online sellers. Buyers can choose from more than 2.5 million unique titles online, compared to 20,000 books at an average mall bookstore.

I can't guarantee you'll make money selling used books. Most booksellers don't get rich, and quite a few go broke. This is not a get-rich-quick scheme. It's hard work. But it's a lot easier to work hard at your own business than for someone else — you reap the rewards.

Assuming you don't make the mistake of opening a walk-in store or hiring employees, you can keep your risk very close to zero. Following the suggestions in this book, you should be able to buy plenty of books for a dollar or two each and sell most of them for \$8 to \$10. It's hard to lose money with profit margins like that.

When I started, I knew nothing about selling books, but it's amazing how fast you can learn by doing something you enjoy. A few people tried to talk me out of writing what you hold in your hands right now, saying I should keep what I've learned to myself. "Don't help your competition," they warned. But I don't look at it that way. Since you're reading this book, you're either interested in

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selling books or may have already started. The ideas in this book will help you take your business to the next level faster than you can through trial and error. And if you run a good bookselling operation, that helps me – if you make a buyer happy, maybe they'll buy from me next time. That buyer will tell their friends about getting used books online, and so on.

My theory about selling used books online is that everyone can win. The more people who become buyers and sellers in this worldwide network, the more valuable it is for everyone to belong. Buyers can find more of what they want, and sellers have more buyers every day.

You might not agree with everything in this book, however. Perhaps after reading this, you'll come up with some better ideas. If you do, or if you think I've got something wrong or left something out, I'd enjoy hearing from you.

Write to me at feedback@weberbooks.com.

-- All the best,
Steve Weber

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This booklet previews the first two chapters of "The Home-Based Bookstore." To buy the complete book, see <http://www.weberbooks.com/book.htm>

Where to Find Books

To find books that can be resold profitably, you'll need to find sources in your area where you can select from a large number of used books at low prices. Later, we'll discuss exactly which books to pick, but for now, let's consider where you'll have the best chance of finding them. After a while, you'll discover which places are best, and make them part of your regular rounds. Here's where to start:

Library sales. In most areas, library sales are by far the best source of stock for booksellers. Sales are often conducted monthly, usually on a Saturday, and feature a wide variety of books at very low prices.

Most library sales are organized by a nonprofit Friends of the Library (FOL) group, and most of the books for sale are donated by area residents in very good or like-new condition. Because the library can't absorb most of this material into its collection, the surplus is offered for public sale as a fundraiser. Nearly all the books are priced at a dollar or two apiece, and again, lots of them can be sold for \$10 or more online.

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Sellers who have learned what books to look for can come away from a good-sized library sale with an addition to their inventory worth a few thousand dollars at a cost of around \$200.

At bigger sales, the FOL may host a “preview” sale for members only. It’s usually well worth the \$20 or so in annual dues to get in on the preview sale. Finding one gem will pay for your annual dues, and you’ll also have the chance to schmooze with your fellow booksellers and collectors. Get your name on the mailing list of all the FOL groups in your region so you’ll know about upcoming sales.

Many libraries also have a small daily book sale at a shelf or cart near the lobby, and some larger library systems even operate a full-time used bookstore. Sometimes these stores, tucked away in a library basement, are unadvertised gold mines.

Some book sales are better than others, however. Where there are large populations, there are lots of books, and sales near bigger cities tend to have more potential inventory. Books are also plentiful in college towns, and lots of them get donated to college-town libraries. Transient populations near universities and military bases leave lots of their books behind when they move on too.

If you can’t find good library sales in your area, try looking a bit farther afield — it may be worth the drive. Look in the newspaper classifieds and consult the Web site www.BookSaleFinder.com. Here, book sale dates are listed by city several months in advance and you can subscribe to e-mail alerts of upcoming sales. The site also

has classified ads from used book buyers and sellers. If you travel out of town for a book sale, combine the trip with visits to the area's used bookshops and thrift stores. You might find an overlooked bargain.

In addition to libraries, schools and civic groups organize book sales, and these sales can include some high-quality donated stock. One caveat about book sales in general, however: the biggest and most widely advertised sales aren't necessarily the best places to find good books. Sometimes the biggest sales feature a lot of junk left over from the last sale. By contrast, sales at tiny branch libraries can be chockfull of great finds but aren't publicized except for a flyer on the lobby bulletin board.

Estate sales. Estate sales can be a big source of stock but are more hit-and-miss than library sales. Normally advertised in newspaper ads, these sales liquidate the entire contents of a household and can include large book collections.

If you attend an estate sale, plan on being the first in the door. This can mean standing in line for 45 minutes or more at a well-publicized sale, but getting first crack at the books can be worth the wait.

Most estate sales are held on Friday or Saturday mornings. Larger sales may begin on Thursday and continue through Sunday. Remaining items are usually marked down 50 percent on the last day, so a good sale may be worth a second visit. But don't pass up good finds on Friday or Saturday because you think you'll get them cheaper on Sunday. By then, 98 percent of the cream will be skimmed. Get the good stuff while you can.

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If there are more estate sales advertised on a given Saturday than you have time to attend, it's worth doing some detective work to determine which sales are likely to have the best books. The newspaper ad should have a contact number for the liquidator running the sale. Phone ahead and ask what types of books are available and how many. Don't rely on the newspaper ad, which might prominently mention "books" among the sale items, when only a dozen cheap paperbacks are available. Likewise, sometimes the ad won't mention books at all, but the estate owner's basement is stacked to the ceiling with collectible volumes.

Books at estate sales are about twice as expensive as those at library sales, and at \$3 to \$5 a pop, you'll need to be more selective because your mistakes will be costlier. If good books are on sale, try negotiating a volume discount. Instead of \$3 per book, for example, ask to pay \$25 for 15 books.

If estate sales work well for you, it's worthwhile to cultivate a relationship with the estate liquidators who work the sales in your area. Leave your business card and ask to be notified of all sales involving books. These contacts may also be able to alert you to book collections that come up for sale outside the estate liquidation process.

Thrift shops. Thrift shops can be worthwhile for book scouting if the store gets new stock in often enough. Unfortunately, some charity thrifts like Goodwill stores have begun selling their best donated books online. If the stock has been cherry-picked already, it's not going to be worth the time.

Church thrift shops are a potential source of stock too, however. The prices are usually reasonable and the donated books are often of higher quality than those at commercial thrift shops.

Used bookstores. A brick-and-mortar shop can be a profit center for experienced online sellers. Many walk-in stores don't have all their inventory online, and you can find pricing discrepancies. Certain books sell for significantly higher prices online than in a local used bookshop. To take but one example, a sharp book scout can regularly find copies of Nickerson's *How I Turned \$1,000 into Five Million in Real Estate* in used bookshops for \$10 to \$15. The online price is \$140.

Remainder distributors. Publisher overstocks and bookstore returns can be a profitable source of inventory for online booksellers. Unlike library sales, however, where you might routinely find good books while blindfolded, you'll need to be very cautious when buying remainders.

The advantage of adding remainders as a sideline to your used-book trade is the potential for expanding volume and profits. However, the average profit margin will be lower than for used books, and you must research the available titles beforehand to avoid buying titles that are too common online and priced low.

Each year, about 20,000 titles go out of print and about 25 million books are remaindered. When sales begin to slack off for a given title, big bookstore chains return much of their inventory to publishers for credit. Since publishers aren't in the business of selling individ-

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ual books, they unload the remainders for pennies on the dollar. But just because remaindered books didn't sell fast enough for the chains doesn't mean you can't make money with them. You'll need to research which of the available titles remain reasonably steady sellers and are still worth half their cover price online. More on that later.

Postal Service auctions. The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) conducts public auctions at mail recovery centers around the country to liquidate unclaimed, damaged, and claim-paid merchandise. On approximately half of the sale dates, about 12 annually, the auctions consist only of bulk book lots. The lots are anywhere from 400 to 800 books and weigh several hundred pounds. Most of the books are like-new or brand-new items that have simply come unpackaged and separated from the delivery address in the mail. Bulk book lots are potluck, however — there's no list of the titles contained therein. Sometimes the lots include miscellaneous books, and sometimes they'll be only textbooks, children's books, or cookbooks, for example. The value of the individual books can range from practically nothing to hundreds of dollars. These auctions can present good buys, but whether it is worth your while will depend on what is included in the lot and how high the bidding goes.

Within the past year or so, the Postal Service has been conducting its book auctions only at its Atlanta Mail Recovery Center, and to further complicate things, some of the lots sold there must be picked up in Saint Paul,

Minnesota. However, the trip can be worth your time and expense.

In addition to auctions, the Postal Service occasionally conducts sales of personal property or its own equipment. These sales are conducted at regular post offices and advertised in local newspapers. Local police departments conduct similar sales of recovered stolen merchandise that has gone unclaimed. Check the classifieds to determine if any to be held in your area include books.

To be placed on mailing lists to receive notices of postal auctions and sales, write a letter expressing interest to these offices:

San Francisco MSC
395 Oyster Point Blvd., Suite 205
So. San Francisco, CA 94099-6260

Chicago MSC
150 South Wacker Dr., Suite 200
Chicago, IL 60606-4100

Memphis MSC
225 North Humphreys Blvd.
Memphis, TN 38166-6260

Windsor MSC
8 Griffin Rd. North
Windsor, CT 06095-1572

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Atlanta Mail Recovery Center
5345 Fulton Industrial Blvd., SW
Atlanta, GA 30378-2400

St Paul Mail Recovery Center
443 Fillmore Ave.
St Paul, MN 55107-9607

More information is available on the Postal Service's Web site: www.usps.com/auctions.

Treasury Department auctions. The U.S. Customs Service regularly auctions off property it has seized for trade violations, trademark or copyright violations, smuggling, drug trafficking, money laundering, and other crimes. The auctioned property includes all sorts of items and sometimes includes large lots of books, CDs, or movies. Such lots are usually listed under the "general merchandise" category.

Most Customs auctions are conducted in New Jersey, Texas, California, and Arizona. It is possible to get a good buy on merchandise at these sales, but as is the case with any auction, the final price for items depends on public interest and what people are willing to pay for them. It's a good idea to go early and inspect the merchandise. Payment is due at the auction. For more information, see the Treasury Department's Web site: www.treas.gov/auctions/customs.

Book fairs. Fairs featuring rare and antiquarian books are less frequent than they used to be because much of the trade has migrated online. Attendance has dropped off at smaller and regional book fairs within the past decade.

An increasingly common type of book fair is the “bargain book” fair. This might be a temporary sale conducted in a vacant store or mall parking lot, and the stock includes publisher overstocks and bookstore returns. The “bargain” price doesn’t mean these books can be sold profitably online, however. Books being unloaded in this fashion are usually in oversupply online, and prices are therefore low. If you’re tempted to buy volumes at such outlets, check the online price first.

Bargain tables. The superstore chains such as Barnes & Noble and Borders continuously offer a selection of bargain or “remainder” books discounted 50 percent to 75 percent off retail at the front of the store. It’s possible to find some gems here that can be resold online.

Sometimes you’ll see first editions on the remainder table, and even copies signed by the author. Depending on the author, you may be able to sell these a few years later as collectibles.

Classified ads. If you have trouble finding enough stock using the sources discussed above, try a classified advertisement.

If you place an ad offering to pay people cash, you’d better be ready for a response. The challenge is

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keeping the nuisance responses to a minimum. Don't give anyone the impression that you're itching to spend a wad of cash on any old books. Keep expectations low. One strategy that seems to work is offering a "finder's fee" for referrals to a collection you agree to buy.

Ads in metropolitan daily newspapers are costly, so look for alternatives such as weekly newspapers and circulars like *Penny Saver* and *Thrifty Nickel*. Another option is Craig's List at www.craigslist.com. The home page displays ads for the San Francisco Bay area, but there may be a link to your region on the right side of the page. The site has become extremely popular within the past few years, and Craig's List pages for most metro areas include several listings for bulk book buyers and sellers.

Lower priority sources

The sources listed below are those that tend to yield the fewest salable books per hour you spend searching. To stay as profitable as possible, you need to focus on the sources that work the best, where you consistently find books. The places below should be your last priority.

Garage sales and yard sales. Weekend neighborhood sales can be an acceptable source of stock if you enjoy wheeling and dealing. Garage and yard sales require lots of legwork though, and the proportion of junk to gems is high.

The main problem is that these sales are full of the stuff people no longer want, which contrasts with an estate sale that liquidates the entire contents of a household. Some yard salers have caught on to this difference and now advertise their garage sales as “estate sales,” aiming to draw more buyers. When you’re scanning the classifieds, beware of yard sales masquerading as estate sales. An “estate sale” that does not advertise items like antique furniture, silver, and stemware might be a yard sale in disguise.

Bulk lots. Each and every day there are hundreds of bulk lots of used books up for auction on eBay. The lots are usually described as someone’s personal collection, but it is more likely that the books are the deadwood from some other online bookseller’s inventory. These bulk lots can be a great deal for book readers but usually not for booksellers. Anyone going to the trouble to list the lot on eBay will also go to the trouble of cherry-picking the lot and keeping the best of it.

One way you might be able to get a deal on an eBay used book lot is limiting your search to sellers in your area, where you can inspect the lot before bidding.

Books on consignment. If enough people know you’re a bookseller, eventually someone may ask you to sell some of their books. Presumably, you’d earn a commission on sales, and this option can be a tempting way to acquire inventory, but it carries pitfalls and can be a distraction. To do it right, you’d need to set up a book-

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keeping system for consignments. You would also need good insurance coverage if you had stock on hand that you didn't own in the event of fire, flood, or some other disaster.

If books offered for consignment look good to you, offer to buy them outright. Sell them yourself and avoid the hassles of a consignment deal, which is seldom a great idea for any business. Television shows such as *Antiques Roadshow* have convinced too many people that treasures are lurking in their attic or basement. Most of the stuff isn't valuable, it's just old. You don't want to be roped into storing someone's worthless books.

This booklet previews the first two chapters of "The Home-Based Bookstore." To buy the complete book, see <http://www.weberbooks.com/book.htm>

What Books to Buy

To make your business highly profitable, you must hone your skill in finding unusual titles — books that are scarce enough to sell for \$25, \$50, and more. Finding just a few of these gems each month will have a big impact on your bottom line.

Along the way, you'll stay busy picking up general interest books for a dollar or two and reselling them for seven or eight dollars — but avoid the common books. A bestseller generally can't be resold online profitably unless the book is still fairly new. Once demand slacks off, prices will fall below \$2 very quickly.

By contrast, out-of-print books can be worth several times their original cover price. I'm not necessarily talking about rare or antiquarian books here — that's a category for later discussion. Here I'm talking about books like *Cards as Weapons*, a 1977 paperback by Ricky Jay. It teaches card-scaling, the art of throwing playing cards, a skill that is apparently always in demand by amateur magicians, card sharks, and hobbyists. The book sells for \$250 online, but it's likely to be priced at 50 cents at a library sale. This is the kind of quirky book you should look for.

Learn to find unusual books

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Below is a partial list of the titles I have purchased for a few dollars and sold online for more than \$100, sometimes *substantially* more. Examine the list and consider each title and how different it is from 99.9 percent of the books you come across. The objective here is not to memorize all the titles so that you can look for them this weekend, but to begin developing your sixth sense for recognizing esoteric books.

- *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*, by Short
- *Curves and Their Properties*, by Yates
- *Hydrocarbon Habitat in Rift Basins*, by Lambiase
- *Introduction to Management Science Deterministic Models*, by Teichroew
- *Principles of Aperture and Array System Design: Including Random and Adaptive*, by Steinberg
- *Synthetic Aperture Radar Systems: Theory and Design*, by Harger
- *Symmetrical Components, As Applied to the Analysis of Unbalanced Electrical*, by Wagner
- *The Theory of Public Finance: A Study in Public Economy* , by Musgrave
- *Statistics for Economics: An Intuitive Approach* , by Caniglia
- *Theory of Elastic Stability*, by Timoshenko
- *Outrageous Misconduct: The Asbestos Industry on Trial*, by Brodeur

- *Studies in the New Experimental Aesthetics: Steps Toward an Objective Psychology of Aesthetic Appreciation*, by Berlyne
- *Cross-Examination: Science & Techniques*, by Pozner
- *The Conceptual Development of Quantum Mechanics*, by Jammer
- *Collecting and Classifying Coloured Diamonds*, by Hofer
- *Interregional and International Trade*, by Ohlin

The trouble with fiction. Unless you already have expertise in fiction collecting, nonfiction is the safest area in which to begin building your inventory of used books.

The big publishers don't overprint nonfiction titles to the same degree they do fiction, so values hold steadier. Also, nonfiction tends to hold more value in the used market because readers *need* nonfiction books. These are the books that explain how to get a job, fix your car, or use the computer. Successful nonfiction books save the reader time and money.

Fiction books, by contrast, compete for the reader's leisure time. For example, there are more than 3,700 used paperback copies of John Grisham's *The Firm* for sale on Amazon Marketplace these days, with hundreds priced at one cent. Unless your copy is signed by Grisham, it's best to donate it to your local public library.

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Make scarce, out-of-print books the mainstay of your business. Today's blockbuster fiction novel will probably be in demand for 6 months to a year, but a quality nonfiction title will sell steadily year after year.

Textbooks. Used textbooks are overlooked by many online sellers, who complain that their value plunges as soon as a new edition is printed. True, prices drop when a new edition appears, but that doesn't necessarily mean you can't profit by selling used textbooks. And vintage texts, particularly graduate-level mathematics and economics books, can be scarce and valuable. University professors, authors, and researchers buy many out-of-print books online — so don't rule out textbooks. Like any other nonfiction category, a certain number are scarce and valuable.

Textbooks to avoid. Introductory sociology and political science texts quickly become oversupplied online when students begin unloading last semester's books. These are the courses that nearly every freshman takes, so the textbooks are printed in huge quantities, and there's no market for such books after a new edition is printed. Because it's introductory material, this information is in several other books that are also readily available.

Study guides, introductory economics, and computer books are rarely worth much after a couple of years. By contrast, biology texts are revised less frequently than any other text category, so their value holds much steadier.

Nonfiction to avoid. Some nonfiction books have particularly low appeal in the used marketplace and are best avoided: Time-Life series, Readers Digest condensed books, and most National Geographic titles. Sports, popular art, and coffee-table tourist books are usually deadwood for the online seller. When new, these books are strong sellers, but hardly anyone wants a used one.

Business and investing books are fertile ground for online sellers, as long as the material isn't too dated and the book was not a mega-seller. Sometimes events can make these books losers overnight. For example, after the stock market crash in 2000, it became almost impossible to sell books about day-trading the market, a category that had been white-hot for the previous few years.

Self-improvement is a strong category, as long as it's not a fad book by a celebrity. Biographies are marginal material most of the time, and memoirs of political figures, especially dead ones, are best left alone.

The history category produces several blockbusters every year, but used copies sell slowly a couple of years after release. Certain historical topics are always strong performers, however: The Civil War, World War II, Vietnam, and anything on the Confederacy. Don't bother with World War I.

Like fiction, certain nonfiction categories must be very current to sell. Don't buy travel books unless it's this year's edition. The same goes for law books.

An area where many sellers can carve out a specialty is in cookbooks. Titles in specialized categories such

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as bread baking, diet cooking, natural foods, and ethnic cooking are ripe for exploration. A good reference is *Cookbooks Worth Collecting*, by Mary Barile. Used microwave cookbooks are to be avoided, however — you can't even give them away.

Other books to avoid

Romance novels. Romance novels will sell quickly if they are brand new, but if you're going to sell romance novels for profit, you'll need to be a romance reader yourself. That's the only way you'll know which ones are worth carrying in your inventory.

Books by comedians. Books by comedians like Bill Cosby, Paul Reiser and Jeff Foxworthy are usually big sellers when new and make great gifts. But the books are generally overprinted and don't have much resale value a short time after printing.

Paperbacks. Mass market paperbacks are tempting to the beginning online seller because of their low purchase cost, and because they are lightweight and can be shipped cheaply. Unfortunately, the online price is quite low for most pocket books more than a few years old. You can better spend your time searching for out-of-print books worth real money.

When a title is selling for under a dollar online, that means not only that the title is oversupplied but that demand is low. Do not hang onto this type of junk hoping to make a bit of profit from shipping and handling. Over time, as your inventory expands and storage space

shrinks, those cheap paperbacks taking shelf space will be a serious burden. Deleting deadwood from your online store and discarding it from your storage space is a tedious, time-consuming affair. This is a chore you can avoid by investing in quality stock now.

The larger-format “trade paperbacks” are less common and can be profitable, but cheap books will come back to haunt you for other reasons as well. It just so happens that the customers who buy the cheapest books are usually your most demanding buyers. The customer who paid less than a dollar for a book is the customer who complains the loudest about shipping fees and delivery times.

Another special category is vintage paperbacks, which are quite collectible. Certain authors, cover artists, series, or genres have legions of fans. Avon, Gold Medal, and Dell “mapbacks” are in demand, so don’t automatically trash old paperbacks without a glance at the cover. Every day, thousands of collectible paperbacks are thrown out or mistakenly sold for a small fraction of their collectible value, which can reach \$500. A good resource is *Collectable Paperback Books*, by Canja.

Know what buyers want. Sometimes a book is in such hot demand and the supply is so low that a “buyers waiting” list is formed on Amazon Marketplace. Every day, 2,000 to 3,000 buyers “pre-order” an item, hoping that a seller will come along with an available copy. Buyers indicate the title, price, and condition of the item they want to purchase. In some cases, these buyers want a book at an unreasonably low price. But in most cases, the

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buyers-waiting list indicates those titles where demand has outstripped supply. If you have an Amazon account, you can download a buyers-waiting report at this address: <https://secure.amazon.com/exec/panama/seller-admin/download/preorder-report/002-7098957-4009620>.

Sellers who list lots of inventory will regularly stumble onto these buyers-waiting situations. If you list an item for sale through the “Sell Yours Here” button, and there is at least one buyer with a pre-order, when you reach the page to indicate your price you’ll see an orange box on the right labeled “BUYER WAITING.” There might also be a message indicating, for example, “Average pending pre-order price (based on your condition) \$20.” You should price your item at least double the average pre-order price. If it remains unsold after a week or so at that price, you can always lower it incrementally to find the exact price that will trigger one of the pre-orders.

How much to pay. How much should you pay for your stock? You should have no trouble limiting your costs to \$2 or \$3 per book by buying at library sales. It’s hard to get into serious trouble when you’re spending only a few dollars per book. If you’re fairly resourceful in finding books and decent at picking them, you should pay about \$1.75 per book on average, and your average sale should be about \$11.

A good rule of thumb is to try to triple your money when acquiring stock. Remember that commissions, shipping costs, and items that don’t sell will cut into that margin. But like every rule, this one has exceptions. If you

find a book you know you'll be able to sell quickly at \$100, do not hesitate to pay \$60 to get it. It's a lot easier to make \$40 on one sale than it is to make \$5 on each of eight separate transactions.

Nobody bets right all the time, and no matter how good you are at picking books, if you're just working on hunches you will inevitably accumulate some losers and pass up winners. However, if you have a Web-enabled cell phone, it's now possible to research book prices even while you're at a sale. You can even hook up a scanner to some of these phones so you don't need to type in the ISBNs. This type of tool can take some of the pure joy out of finding great books through serendipity, but it can also help your bottom line. See the section on Advanced Automation for a list of vendors of wireless price-lookup services.

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