

## BOOKSELLING

### *A potty Potter selling strategy*

This claim from contributor Michael Lieberman's blog caught Alcuin's eye last summer: "*Harry Potter & the Deathly Hallows* will be the first book in history in which most of the copies were sold without the booksellers making a dime." How could this be true, especially when we're talking about a million books or more? How many poor Canadians were subjected to summer CBC interviews about the boon Potter has been for Raincoast and his other publishers? The answer lies in part with all those bookshops—even independent toy stores—offering discounts for advance orders.

The Potter franchise has become a loss leader, and every branch of retail is getting in on the act. By discounting the cover price of the book by up to 50 percent, retailers were fighting for their share of the tween frenzy that would define the book's publication. The problem with this retailing strategy is that a loss leader is supposed to be offset by unplanned purchases the punters make between the Potter stack and the checkout. The strategy works in the Costcos and similar bigbox stores that carry best-sellers (with the in-transit unplanned purchases being made by the

parents), but not so much in bookshops, especially of the smaller, independent type. Potter has not sparked a wholesale revival of young adult literature: that reading Harry Potter is cool does not translate to reading Enid Blyton, C.S. Lewis or any of Rowling's other predecessors being cool.

The Potter series is a phenomenon, and deservedly so. Whatever Rowling may lack in literary refinement she makes up for in plotting. The series' young fans—two generations of them now—have experienced the joy of anticipating the next book. Like any enjoyable experience, this is something they'll look to repeat, so we can't say Rowling and Potter haven't contributed to an appreciation for what a good book on the go adds to life.

From a collecting perspective, the best that can be said for Potter is that the books have been so wretchedly produced, using paper that practically yellows while being read, that despite the huge print runs, in a hundred years or so there might not be that many copies in fine condition. Alcuin suggests that those who must buy with any thought of longevity consider the "deluxe" issues. While not true firsts, these do use better paper and allow at least enough margin that the reader's digits don't intrude onto the text.

At the recent Reckoning 07 (a symposium on writing and publishing in British Columbia) I had a long talk with my distributor about the dismal state of book publishing in Canada. He mentioned that the only reason he can stay afloat is because he and his wife do almost all the work themselves and are happy to work long hours for very little. He puts a lot of the blame not on government subsidies or interference (he focuses on publishing and distributing non-fiction and doesn't get grants) but on the big chains. And the same is true of the independent bookstore owners we know: if they have to hire much help, they go under. The same holds for Tricouni Press: my wife and I don't factor our time into our projects, otherwise we'd be too discouraged to take on any projects at all. We don't get government subsidies: we don't publish poetry or "literature," so in the eyes of some people we don't rate as "serious" publishers.

Friesens (probably the most important printer of trade books in Canada today) recently reported that the average print run for all types of books has been in steady decline for the last few years. Fewer people are buying fewer new books. Fewer young people are reading and collecting books; most of my used/rare book dealer friends say that the average age of their customers is increasing, and they worry about what will happen after the current collectors stop collecting.

My wife Joy and I love books and believe in their importance to society. We'll just keep doing projects that we feel passionate about at a pace we can afford. And we'll keep buying books until we drop! Reckoning 07 turned out to be very enjoyable and informative. It certainly wasn't just a bunch of talking heads performing a requiem for book publishing in B.C.

*Glenn Woodsworth.*