

Buying Out-of-Print Books on the Internet, Where the Old is New Again

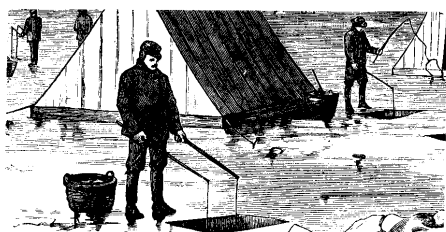
by **Jane Brodsky Fitzpatrick** (Assistant Professor, Acquisitions & Collection Development Librarian, Mina Rees Library, The Graduate Center (CUNY) New York City, NY 10016; Phone: 212-817-7056) <jfitzpatrick@gc.cuny.edu>

I work at the **Mina Rees Library** of the **City University of New York (CUNY)**, the **Graduate Center**, in the heart of Manhattan. The **Graduate Center** is the PhD granting campus of **CUNY**. The students are required to do extensive reading in their disciplines, which often entails finding older and out-of-print titles.

Despite the research level of classes, the **Mina Rees Library** is not a research level library; nor was it ever meant to be one. When the **Graduate Center** was founded in 1961, it was on 42nd street, across from the **New York Public Library (NYPL)** (<http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/index.html>). Having a premier research institution so close by meant it was unnecessary even to try to duplicate its rich and deep resources. In 1999 the **Graduate Center** relocated to Fifth Avenue at 34th street, still only blocks away from **NYPL**. The southeast corner of the same building that now houses the **Graduate Center** is where **New York Public's Science Industry and Business branch (SIBL)** (<http://www.nypl.org/research/sibl/>) is located; so again, proximity belies the need for **Mina Rees** to attempt, with limited tax levy money, to be a research level library. Of these two branches, only **SIBL** has a circulating collection. However, there are many resources, online and in print, available to our students and faculty at **NYPL**.

The collection at the **Mina Rees Library** is built on the reserve requests of professors at the **Graduate Center**. As clearly stated in our collection policy: "Course reserves and departmental reading exam lists are the primary determinants for Library purchases. Additional desiderata lists are compiled by selectors in their programs" (http://library.gc.cuny.edu/collections/collection_policies.html). About 80% or more of the titles purchased are on a rush basis for reserves. While many professors will send us their requests lists two or three months in advance, the majority come to the acquisitions department within a month of the beginning of the semester; and many arrive during the first weeks of the semester, so I need to know if and when I can obtain these requested items in a timely manner.

Before I worked at the **Mina Rees Library**, the acquisitions department was using a very expensive search service for out-of-print books. Surcharges were sometimes double the cost of the book. There was no guarantee of the quality or condition of the book, nor was there any information about or control of delivery options. It could take months to obtain a title, or it might never arrive.



As a librarian, and with so many book dealers now online, I knew I could find these titles myself without the help of that company.

While once it would have involved a lot of paper correspondence; weeks, if not months of waiting; and costly shipping charges, with the advent of **Alibris**, my most used out-of-print dealer, ordering is easy, practical, and efficient. In fiscal 2008-2009, we spent \$16,475.00 at **Baker & Taylor** for about 335 new print titles, or about \$49.00 per title. On New York state contract, there are good discounts at **Baker & Taylor**; but they cannot provide us with all that we need. These days, with short print runs, titles may go out-of-print within a year of publication and often need to be obtained from non-traditional dealers. In contrast, our fiscal year total at **Alibris** most but not all of which were older titles was almost \$16,000.00 for approximately 490 print titles, averaging \$32.65 per title; more bang for the buck, as it were. Since neither of these vendors charges shipping, Internet book buying is a huge improvement for our acquisitions. Barely 5% of the titles from **Baker & Taylor**, not surprisingly, were published in the 1990's; the rest were published after 2000. By contrast, only 60% of the titles from **Alibris** were published after 2000, while 25% are from the 1990's, 10% from the 1980's, and 15% pre-1980.

At **Alibris** (and also at **AbeBooks**, which I will discuss later), one can search a world of book dealers. They run the gamut from established bookstores such as **Powell's Books**, online retailers such as **A1 books**, and many small dealers and collectors, and function as a meta-search tool. Without a service such as **Alibris**, it would require a huge network and deep knowledge of the used and out of print book industry (we do not buy rare books) to find the titles we need; and the process would be very time consuming. It would be nearly impossible to fill rush reserve lists in a timely manner.

I use the libraries side of the **Alibris** Website (<http://library.alibris.com/>) for several reasons. **Alibris for Libraries** is more expensive than the retail side, but a library can set up an account and use purchase orders. On the **Alibris** consumer site, shipping is charged on each purchase, while, through quantity ordering (ten books per order or reaching a certain spending level over the year), shipping is free from the library side. The benefits of having an account are worth the extra cost on the library side. There is a liberal return policy, and

one can contact **Alibris** for problems or questions without having to deal with a multitude of dealers. If a book's condition is not as stated, returns are free. That has happened from time to time, but only once in six years did I have to complain about a vendor (and with **Alibris**, I have names, email addresses, and even telephone numbers of people who I know will respond). I could buy the books for less on the commercial side, but that requires a credit card. And although I do have a library credit card, there is a lot of time consuming paperwork involved because only I can use the card for purchases; and I have to reconcile the monthly statements. **Alibris** has all the books shipped to their warehouse and then ships one or two cartons to us. While this can delay receipt of the books, there is a rush drop ship option available as well where the library pays shipping.

If a book's price is terribly out of range of its list price on **Alibris for Libraries**, **AbeBooks** (<http://www.abebooks.com/>) is another option, as is **Amazon.com** and now **Barnes & Noble** for libraries. Both now include used book dealers' posting on their sites. **Barnes & Noble** of late has become second choice for me after **Alibris** because, after a rough start, **Barnes & Noble** was able to set up a purchase order tax exempt account for us. They extend discounts to libraries and have a surprisingly deep stock of older titles. Their 24 hour free delivery service cannot be beat!

I have been unable to set up a library purchase order account with **Amazon**, although the library did have one at some point. They require bank account information that is impossible for me to supply, and they have very strict accounts payable policies. As anyone who works at a large public institution knows, sometimes payments are slow to be made. That said, I pay an annual fee (\$79) for free two day shipping; and ordering is easy once you set up your online profile. Again, the time it takes at the end of the month to reconcile our credit card statement makes **Amazon** third choice for me. Although there are no "people" contacts, **Amazon** does stand by the third party purchases and offers good online support. Unfortunately, they are now required to charge sales tax (although the third party dealers do not), which means sending an email for each charge asking that the tax be credited. Our tax exempt information is on file with them.

We also once did a large amount of purchasing from **AbeBooks**. They have listings from most of the same dealers as **Alibris**, and the prices match the commercial side of **Alibris**. **AbeBooks**'s international side is a reasonably good resource for out of print Spanish language titles (the bane of my acquisitions needs). There is often an option to request an invoice

continued on page 32

Buying Out-of-Print Books ...
from page 30

for prepayment, but this takes a long time. Our business office requires tax ID numbers for any vendor, which sometimes has led to some nasty responses from small dealers who do not want to share that information (which might be their social security number). For the most part, **AbeBook** orders are credit card purchases. The frustrating part of ordering from **AbeBooks** is that more than 90% of the time dealers do not provide invoices or even credit card receipts. All we have is the print

page option before the final purchase is made. I have not had success in getting personal responses from **AbeBooks** itself, but most of the dealers will reply to queries.

In short, the customer service side of **Alibris** makes it for me the best choice for online book purchases. While all the above sites also have search and want list features, I don't use these because most of our orders are time sensitive. Online ordering has made discovery of out-of-print and hard to find titles quite easy (sometimes even a **Google** search with an ISBN will result in discovering an obscure publisher to order from). The

fill rate is better because all vendors provide up-to-date inventory information. There are certainly times when vendors cancel a title, but vendor ratings on **Alibris** and **AbeBooks** make it easier to choose who is most likely to provide the title in a timely manner. Over time, I have learned through experience to recognize the different vendors' performance. Ordering foreign titles, either through **Amazon's** outlets or international publishers, is relatively easy. The Internet has truly revolutionized the out-of-print book market. I can't imagine going back to the way it was. 🌱