

I am making this submission as a heavy consumer of books, who a few days ago returned from travelling in the USA and Ireland. I confine my comments to 'trade' books only.

I am a volunteer at our local community library, with responsibility for buying the books stocked by our library. As our funding is very limited, in order to maintain a good stock of books I try to buy our books at the lowest prices that I possibly can. I also have 2 children who are voracious readers. Over the course of a year, I would spend upwards of \$20,000 on books, both privately and on behalf of the library.

I should say at the outset that, from the consumers' perspective, I believe that our book industry is in extremely good shape.

Before our recent travels, I was not as sanguine – I had read what articles came my way regarding the Parallel Imports issue, and had vaguely accepted what seemed to be the prevailing view, that books in Australia are both expensive and not promptly published.

Having trawled bookstores in both the USA and Ireland looking for various titles, I have to say that my impression now is that we have readily available to us in Australia a far greater range of titles than either country – perhaps a little more expensive than the US (but generally of far better physical quality), but certainly no more expensive than Ireland (and presumably the rest of the EU). I was also buying books before I left home that were not yet available overseas. I should note here that my experience is not even with city bookstores – I find all my books quite easily at the local shopping mall, which has two book franchises, plus Big W & Target.

I found that both the US and Ireland had an extensive range of local authors/titles (which generally included the UK in the case of Ireland), but a limited range of "foreign" titles. This may be good for local authors, but is not really in the interests of the consumer. [In fact, I was shocked at the poor range of non-Irish books available in Cork, Ireland. We travel to Ireland every couple of years, and over the last few trips I have noticed a gradual deterioration in the range of books available, but it was particularly noticeable this trip. Given Ireland's rich literary history, I found that quite sad - and it struck me that whatever they are doing, we should not follow.]

A few specific examples –

- My daughter was desperate for Jacquelyn Wilson's new book "Cookie" (UK), due out here just after we left home. We searched a number of bookstores in Honolulu and LA, to find that there were very few of her titles on the shelves, and in fact even her previous book was not due out in the US until March 2009. We found the new book once we reached Cork;
- Sarah Gruen's "Water for Elephants" (USA), readily available here, was also widely available in the US, having just been reprinted (to the extent that there were stands devoted to it in even airport shops). However, trying to buy it as a Christmas present in Cork, the main bookstore did not stock it, and I eventually found the last copy in the other city store at the bottom of a random stack;
- Tamora Pierce, a US writer of young adult fantasy, also readily available here, was very scarce in Cork;
- John Flanagan's "Ranger's Apprentice" series (Aust) was on the shelves in the US, but not Cork.

I also noticed a number of titles that I had bought for the library in November, that were only just being released, or had not yet been released, in one or both countries – eg: Bernard Cornwell's "Azincourt". Further, any books that were significantly cheaper in the USA were also generally of a greatly inferior quality.

As far as local prices are concerned – yes, if you are restricted to paying RRP for your books, they are expensive (children's books significantly less so). However, there are a number of avenues available

for cheaper books. I buy my books from a number of sources, including franchises of major book retailers Dymocks & Angus & Robertson. Mainstream bestsellers are heavily discounted at Big W, which has quite a good selection (also at Target, which has a narrower selection); children's books are discounted through Scholastic's schools program as well as Big W; and the bookstores themselves often discount books. I have only once resorted to buying books on-line, and that was when I wanted back-copies of books no longer available here. Usually, the shipping costs outweigh any savings obtained from, for instance, Amazon.

It seems to me that our system is working well for consumers (GST notwithstanding), and that any changes made that would interfere with the current competition would be to the consumer's detriment.

Kim Healy
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