



LAUGHING BEAR 122

NEWSLETTER

June 2000; edited by Tom Person; Copyright © 2000 by Laughing Bear Press; Estab. 1976; ISSN 1056-0327
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http://www.laughingbear.com; Keyword: Laughing Bear; \$15/12 issues, \$17.50/Canada, £15/UK, Eire, \$25/other

The Surviving Small Press: Online Auctions

If you are familiar with online auctions at all, you've probably considered selling your books on one. If you aren't familiar with online auctions, approach them with care. They are addictive!

I'll be talking about eBay here, but you can insert the name of any other auction; they are all pretty much alike. eBay is the largest online auction site and does the most business. As of July 1999, eBay averaged 50 million page views per day, \$200 million gross sales per month, and eBay auctions account for five percent of all home-to-home package deliveries in the U.S. You can buy and sell virtually anything that isn't food, alive, or illegal.

I buy and sell old postcards under the name, tomp97. I've sold cards I bought for 10 or 25 cents for up to \$23.50 each.

If you are going to try to sell books in an online auction, you need to look at it as something to do for fun. You aren't going to sell thousands of books this way, but you might sell a few dozen and learn a few tricks about copy writing, customer service and selling along the way.

All you need is a good .JPEG (or .JPG) format image of your book and a computer with internet access. Registering with eBay is free. There is a small fee to put an item up for auction (\$0.25 for an item initially priced at \$0.01 to \$9.99, \$0.50 for \$10.00 to \$24.99,

and so on). When the item is sold, eBay takes 5% of the final price for sales up to \$25.00, 2.5% for up to \$975.00.

On eBay there are two kinds of auctions. If you put one item up for sale, that is a regular auction. If you put two or more items up for sale at the same time in the same listing, that is called a Dutch auction.

A regular auction works as you'd probably expect. When you list an item, you assign an asking price. If only one person bids, they get it for that price. If more than one person bids, the price goes up with each bid.

In a Dutch auction, you have a number of identical items for sale. The math of bidding in a Dutch auction is complicated, but at the bottom line it is unlikely the final price will ever be much higher than the asking price since the highest bidders all buy the items at the lowest successful bid price. (I said it was complicated.)

If a Dutch auction does not attract bids, you lose more than with a regular auction because you pay an insertion fee for each item in the auction (e.g., 12 books x \$0.25 each = \$3.00).

The prudent thing to do is to try selling your book in a regular auction several times until you have a title (the headline of your auction, so to speak) and a description you know will grab attention. After all each regular auction costs just \$0.25 to try.

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Why People Bid On Auctions

People go to eBay for many reasons: to find something they need, to find bargains, to add to a collection, and to find something that triggers an emotional link to their past. The last two reasons account for most loyal eBay enthusiasts and for the occasional bidding wars that make eBay exciting for both bidders and sellers.

Selling old postcards, I've found that most people who buy them come from the place the postcard depicts. Sometimes there will even be a story behind the sale.

One woman paid \$8.50 for a plain old card from the 1920's that showed a simple wooden bridge in a forest. She told me that when she was a girl her family would drive over it to get to the lake they'd vacation at every year. She could still hear the sound the tires made on the wood.

Over and over I find that it is not the item that makes the sale. It is the person's reaction to the item. And that is what you've got to anticipate when you are preparing an auction. Would you rather sell your book cheap to a bargain hunter, or at a premium to someone who will really appreciate it?

I've observed that books on local or regional history, that can be tied to a particular era, that relate to an activity (sports, summer vacations, local industry, etc.) or the way people live, do well.

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Online Auctions

(continued)

The most important part of an auction is the title. On eBay you have 45 characters including spaces and punctuation to describe the book, entice the bidder, and get them to click the title to get the description and see the cover. You have virtually unlimited space to describe the book and display graphics, but that won't do you any good without a knockout title.

The thing to remember is bidders navigate eBay by searching for keywords. Unless your book is well known or the title is descriptive of what it is about, it is unlikely they'll search for the book title or author. They'll be searching for the subject.

A good auction title should include the subject of your book, genre, and something specific to set it apart. For instance I reviewed *Ragged Lion: A Tribute to Jack Micheline* in LBN 119. That title would barely fit in a 45 character auction title and would come up in searches for Jack Micheline, "Ragged Lion", and "Tribute".

"Ragged Lion" and "Tribute" are poor keywords: "Ragged Lion" is obscure and "Tribute" is too general (I searched and found 1,710 references, for the most part tributes to sports figures and musicians).

A better auction title would be, "Jack Micheline Beat Poet and Artist, Mint HB". With that title, you could find it searching for his name, "Beat Poet", "Artist" or "Poet". "Mint HB" describes the item as not only a book, but a mint condition cloth bound book.

You can pay more to enhance the way your listing appears in search results with a thumbnail image or boldface type, but those don't make much difference. You can also have your auction featured in special forums, but the cost can be more than the value of the book.

The best way to add value to your book is to sign it or in some other way add a personal touch the customer couldn't get buying it from a bookstore. Another way to get the bidding started is to price the book below retail.

Remember, this is an auction. If you have a well written auction title and a little luck, you can pick up multiple bidders who may even push the price up well over retail if the book is worth it to them.

There are several strategies to pricing auctions. You can price the item very low to attract bidders and hope they will drive the price up. Or you can ask for full retail price at the start. The rule of thumb, though, is to ask for the least amount you are willing to accept, then anything more will be a bonus.

The exciting aspect of selling through an auction is that anything can happen. It is not unusual to see an item originally priced at 99 cents get caught up in a bidding war and sell for \$100.00. It is also not unusual for an item to start out at 99 cents and sell for 99 cents, even though it is worth a lot more. It just depends on how many of the right bidders happen to find it while the auction is on. Auctions on eBay can last 3, 5, 7 or 10 days; it's the seller's choice.

You can set an unrealistically low price and protect yourself by setting a "reserve" price as well. A reserve is a second price that isn't disclosed. If an item is initially priced at \$2.00, but the reserve is \$20.00, even though the bids only reach \$7.50 before at the end of the auction, the seller does not have to sell the item to the highest bidder. The reserve was not met.

Reserve auctions should be avoided. They are not appreciated by bidders. The only time they are appropriate is for very high value items where the seller is afraid of scaring away bidders with the actual cost. Even then, they aren't a

good idea. Many bidders refuse to take part in auctions that carry a reserve on principle.

Once you've got your title, price, graphic(s) and description, post your auction and see what happens. Try different titles to reach different groups of bidders. And when you do sell a book, contact the buyer by e-mail immediately, conduct the transaction in a friendly manner, and send out the book as soon as you receive payment. Also remember to leave the buyer feedback.

In eBay, "Feedback" makes or breaks both buyers and sellers. It is an ingenious system that keeps everyone honest and encourages the best behavior.

When you receive payment for a book, you can go to the web page for that auction and leave a message about the buyer. Either they paid quickly and were a pleasure to deal with, or their check bounced and you'd never have anything to do with them again. The buyer can leave the same sort of message about you after the transaction is completed.

The feedback you've received is available to everyone you deal with. It is proof of how you conduct yourself and people will judge you by it. A record of good feedback on eBay is as valuable as a good credit rating in the real world. It's also a very handy way of telling whether you should send a book out as soon as the check arrives or wait until the check clears.

If you find you enjoy selling books online, look around your house for stuff you don't use or need anymore. Items you may consider obsolete, out of style, or useless may be just what someone out there is willing to pay good money for.

There's a 1930's waffle iron on eBay right now that has been bid up from \$24.99 to \$228.27 with three days to go! ●

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More on Credit Cards

Last month's article on alternative credit card services got a healthy response and raised a few questions. Also, since that issue came out PayPal has started offering business services.

In the article I was discussing CCNow (<http://www.ccnow.com>) and PayPal (<http://www.paypal.com>) as credit card services I use.

CCNow acts as a retailer in that a person ordering a book from your site actually places the order through CCNow. Then CCNow (the Retailer) orders the book from you (the Wholesaler) and has you ship it to the customer.

That sounds goofy, but it means you don't have to deal with sales tax (since CCNow is in a tax free state), CCNow offers the customer 24 hour customer service by phone, and CCNow takes a percentage just like a bookstore would (except it is 9% instead of 40%).

CCNow pays you twice a month, will accept and convert international currencies on your behalf, and pays interest on the money it holds for you.

PayPal acts like a bank. It takes money from the customer and places it in your account. It doesn't care what the money is for and sees both you and your customer as equal customers of PayPal. And PayPal is only available for transactions in the United States. It cannot be used for Canadian sales.

With it's new business services, PayPal will be offering 24 hour customer service (though it is not clear whether this will be for orders your customers place, as with CCNow, or just concerns with your PayPal account). You'll be able to accept payments directly from your web site, and you will even be able to write checks on your PayPal account. The PayPal business account will charge 1.9% on all money you receive. Personal PayPal accounts are still free. ●

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This translation is done automatically, so there may be some misinterpretations or embarrassing translations. If you have proper names, addresses, or hyperlinks that contain common words, they may be translated as well, making them useless. But still, even a poor translation is better than none at all if your goal is to get across basic information to as many people as possible.

When a page is translated, a Worldlingo.com banner appears at the top of the page offering professional translation services and quoting a price for a top quality, human translation of the page. Your visitor can pick up the gist of the page from the mechanical translation and then pay if they want a better one.

I have added the Worldlingo.com icon to the upper right corner of several of the articles on the Laughing Bear site. I don't mind that I don't get a percentage of the fees generated by the translations, I'm just grateful I can offer the articles in six languages without having to pay for translations.

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Why People Bid On Auctions *(continued)*

Books on esoteric subjects like family histories, local businesses and small town history that would probably not even make it onto the shelves of bookstores outside their region, are particularly popular on eBay.

Laura and I found a book on the history of Brownsville, Texas for \$5.00, but lost it in the last seconds of the auction when someone slipped in a bid that took the total up to \$20.50.

I've paid more than I should for books on the Seattle area. But they are worth it to me because I can't get them here, and because they provide a connection for me to my home town.

Bidding and selling on auctions can be addictive. Part of the thrill is in finding items you wouldn't dream were available, but another part is the auction process.

The reason auctions are popular, besides the variety of treasures that can be found, is the element of competition auctions have that no other form of trade other than barter can claim. There can be a huge sense of satisfaction in winning an auction – and exhilaration for the seller whose initial price for an item triples, quadruples, or more.

It's exciting to watch an auction with multiple bidders as the last minutes and seconds tick down. I've won and lost auctions in the last ten seconds. And I had fun with both.

And that's a final reason people sell and buy online in auctions: It's fun. You never know what you'll find and you never know what you'll be able to sell.

You'll have much better luck with auctions if you go into them with the expectation of having a good time rather than making a killing. If you get upset when you don't have instant success, don't bother selling in auctions. ●

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Inspiration /

Perspiration by Dan Lukiv

Some people speak about “the Muse” inspiring them, “giving” them the words to write, firing them up with the thoughts, images, and technical wizardry to compose a great poem – or fiction. . . . But I figure “the Muse” is simply sweat and craft and clear thought.

I’m not alone in such a stand. Ellen E.M. Roberts, in *The Children’s Picture Book* (Writer’s Digest Books, 1981), says:

“Probably Tom Edison was right when he described genius as ‘one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.’”

Daniel Manus Pinkwater, the author of such picture books as *Bear’s Picture* and *Around Fred’s Bed*, has this to say on work and inspiration:

“My method and theory of art: I have this desk. When I spend a number of hours per day seated at it, I usually end up having written . . . something. When I don’t sit, I don’t write. . . . I would not take a million dollars for that desk.”

Perhaps Pinkwater’s desk provides that 1% inspiration. But his tongue in his cheek essentially says that hard work, not some ephemeral Muse, “gets the job done”.

Now then, if you truly want to be a poet, or fiction writer, you may, if you want to, wait for this Moose – I mean, Muse – chap, gal, actually: the Muse can be any one of Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Urania – to drop in, but you might – should – find better success by simply firing up your word processor and applying that “ninety-nine percent perspiration” thing.

Dan Lukiv is a poet, fiction writer, and occasional contributor to LBN. His poetry book, The Germans From Dortmund, is online at <http://www.track0.com/lukiv>. •

Announcements

- **National Book Awards** (The National Book Foundation, 2000 National Book Awards, 260 Fifth Ave., 9th Floor, New York, NY 10001; 212-685-0261; <http://www.nationalbook.org>). There is still time to submit a book for the awards. The deadline for entry forms is July 10; books, galleys, or manuscripts August 14. Books must be published between December 1, 1999 and November 30, 2000 to be eligible.
- **Evins Communications, Ltd.** (Helen Moloney, Director, Author & Book Promotion/Publishing Media Service; 635 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10022; 212-688-8200; <http://www.evins.com>) is a marketing communications and public relations firm that can handle book promotion, media tours, publicity, and media relations.
- **The Woman’s Guide To Self-Publishing** by Donna M. Murphy (Irie Publishing & Productions, 301 Boardwalk Dr., PO Box 273123, Fort Collins, CO 80527-3123; <http://www.IRIE-Publishing.com>; \$17.95) is a comprehensive guide to help women understand and pursue self-publishing. It covers research, manuscript development, production, promotion, distribution.
- **copyRights© Newsletter** (Lynda Utterback, pub.; JLM Unlimited, Inc.; 1841 Hicks Rd., Ste. C, Rolling Meadows, IL 60008; <http://www.copyrightsnewsletter.com>; \$99/6 issues) is a newsletter that keeps up with everything about copyrights, from registering a web site to current rulings and litigation.
- **Masters of Marketing Seminar for Publishers, Authors and Speakers** (Publishing Directions, 90 Southbury Plaza, Southbury CT 06488; 800-562-4357; <http://www.strongbooks.com>) will be held October 14-15 at the Hilton Hotel, Newark, NJ Airport. There will be speakers and breakout sessions. See their web site for details.

- **The Brobdingnagian Times** (96 Albert Road, Cork Ireland; 50p/issue) is a literary broadsheet with poetry and short fiction with contributors from around the world. The broadsheet is essentially an 8-page booklet folded from a single sheet instead of cut and bound.
- **BookTech West Conference & Exposition and Bookbuilders West Book Show** (BookTech West, 401 N. Broad St., Philadelphia, PA 19108; 888-627-2630 toll free; <http://www.booktechexpo.com>) will be held at the San Francisco Marriott, December 11-13, 2000. (The book show will be Dec. 11 only.) BookTech is a trade show with all the new technologies and trends in publishing.
- **The International Directory of Little Magazines & Small Presses** (Dustbooks, PO Box 100, Paradise, CA 95967; 800-477-6110) will be going to press in its 36th edition this summer, but there is still time to buy an ad. A good place to advertise if your publications are for writers, poets, or other publishers.
- **Bueno Books/In Your Ear Publications** (Dr. Elizabeth Reid, ed.), which publishes foreign language ed. materials, has moved to 914 Pine Dr., Caldwell, TX 77836.

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