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The Future of Books

by Pia de Jong

As I walk into the new Amazon bookstore that just opened on Columbus Circle in Manhattan, I have a disorienting feeling that I have not entered a bookstore but rather fallen into the world of my computer screen. Like a cyber version of Alice tumbling into her rabbit hole, I have fallen into a worm hole that takes me into a bricks-and-mortar version of Amazon's website.

In this store, all the books are arranged on the shelves with their full covers displayed, just as they are on the website. They are grouped by suggestions in the store the same way the website does it: if you like this book you may find this other one interesting, too. No one asks for my own opinion.

"It's about the journey of discovery," I read in a folder. Soon I start to understand what this means. I will discover first of all which books are most popular. There is a section of page-turners, another one on books that can be read on a Kindle in three days, and another shelf with the most requested books. A sign says, "97 percent of the readers gave five stars to this book." I feel an instant bond with the malcontented 3 percent who were more stingy with their stars.

I have not ended up in Bookwonderland. This is the shining palace that enshrines the winners of a Darwinian popularity contest. The 3,000 books sold here are the survivors of a murderous competition, determined by the statistical analysis of millions of sales figures. Amazon is proud that these books in its store collectively collected 1.7 million five-star reviews.

It's too much for me to buy a book. Previously there was an old-fashioned bookstore here, full of curios and knickknacks and idiosyncratic books. Due to the murderous competition of online sellers, it was forced to close. Ironically, Amazon has now opened a bookstore here, as if the Mafia started its own pasta restaurant.

Amazon spent its way to the top. Its founder Jeff Bezos (a 1986 Princeton alumus with degrees in electrical engineering and computer science) was looking for a gap in the market 20 years ago. What's small, easy to ship, the same everywhere, and comes in so much variety that there's a chance that someone in a store cannot find what he's looking for? A book, thought Bezos, and rightly so. Online book sales became an unprecedented success. He did not stop at books. As a result, 43 percent of everything sold online worldwide is on Amazon. Bezos is one of the three richest people in the world and soon he will soon knock Bill Gates off his throne.

I feel unsettled after my visit. This is the bookshop of the future. The combined will of the readers is on display here. Every book is a winner. There is no room for losers. But I miss the serendipity. The surprise of the unexpected, the lucky coincidence that rewarded me when I went to the local bookstore as a teenager with my pocket change and forgot about time while I browsed among the shelves. The books I found by chance and changed my life while I was looking for something else. The idle browsing around that gives us our priceless pleasures.

Outside, it is now darker. A stream of taxis flows around Columbus Circle and dissolves into a half-yellow-half-red circle of light. In the middle of the plaza, on top of a high pedestal, stands a triumphant bronze image of the square's eponymous hero: Christopher Columbus.

Columbus was looking for Asia, the five-star bestseller of the explorer category. But he stumbled upon a very different continent almost by chance. In serendipity lies the true exploration.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her memoir, "Saving Charlotte: A Mother and the Power of Intuition," was published in July by W.W. Norton. She is filling in for Richard K. Rein, who is on his self-proclaimed "customary" summer break.

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