

[Address withheld]

The Competition Commission
Victoria House
Southampton Row
WC1B 4AD

2nd January 2006

Dear Sirs

I write regarding the proposed takeover of Ottakar's by Waterstone's, which I gather you are currently investigating. Unlike many other letters you may have received (from what I read in the national press), this is one in support of the proposed merger.

I am an author, and a book buyer. I have been shocked, and rather ashamed, of the way publishers and writers have clubbed together in a sustained attack on Waterstone's. This has been done purely, I believe, to protect the interests of the publishers who are still reeling from the demise of the net book agreement. (And authors, who are rather held to ransom by their publishers, have been – to some degree - coerced into supporting the publishers to whom they are beholden. Except Alan Bennett, who strangely thinks market forces shouldn't apply to books at all so he can make as much money as possible.)

When I approached my local Waterstone's manager about my newly published biography he immediately ordered copies and gave them a prominent position in the store. Although our local store is small, it beats the other, larger competitors in the area hands down, every time. We have a Books Etc, WH Smith, Ottakars and two independent book stores in Wimbledon – but when I need to conduct any detailed research for my own books I know from experience that I shouldn't waste my time anywhere else, and go straight to Waterstone's or I buy from Amazon.

In my experience, publishers completely rely on the booksellers to do the hard work of promoting books: they take on too many books then throw them at the market, leaving retailers to do the promoting, advertising and marketing. Retailers like Waterstone's do a lot of the hard work, then see the books being ordered through Amazon. The authors, meanwhile, are blithely regarded by publishers as if they should be grateful for the opportunity to see their work in print. My brother, for example, who is also a writer and specialist in his field, has just been offered a new book for a well-known, international and popular series of reference books. The fee? £4000 for 150,000 words – that's about six to nine months' work. I truly believe that publishers exist in a rather

rarefied world, almost a bubble of their own making; they are not much like real people.

While publishers are up in arms about the fact that a stronger Waterstone's will force them to negotiate on prices, they will continue to sell bestsellers to the supermarkets at knock-down prices, making it almost impossible for high street retailers to compete. In reality, the threat to the book market comes from the supermarkets, the internet and the rather archaic, old-boys-network attitude of publishers. A little shaking up won't do them any harm at all.

Much of my writing falls into the non-fiction and reference category. Once I have been paid I lose all rights to my own work – this is a condition the publishers demand. They are then free to chop my writing and turn it into a completely 'new' book, or they sell my writing to other publishers around the world and continue to make money on it years and years down the line. This is the reality for many writers.

Interestingly, while some of my books have sold through Waterstone's, the vast majority of them have – so far – sold through the internet, primarily Amazon. I believe that the OFT felt that the internet book market is not in direct competition to the high street retailers – and have to ask what planet these people are on!! Of course they are competition, as are supermarkets. I am just as likely to buy my research books from Amazon as I am from Waterstone's – and I am more likely to buy a top-20 book from Tesco (though I spit on their name) than from a high street bookshop because, in both instances, they are usually cheaper!!

I truly believe that the long-term future for high street booksellers is in the balance. If Ottakar's and Waterstone's can combine to make a stronger, more powerful retailer in the high street that can compete with the internet and supermarkets, then that's great. If they can exert more pressure on publishers – and force them to be rather better at what they do then we might see less of the Celebrity Trash Biography and more of the real literary talent that is undoubtedly out there. And maybe there's a chance that when my kids are grown-up they can take their own children into a quality local book store that offers a huge range of books at reasonable prices. And surely that's something we'd all want?

Yours faithfully

[name withheld]