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From: Hal Duncan

Sent: 06 January 2006 18:13

To: Alan Shearman

Subject: HMV/Waterstones takeover of Ottakars

Dear Mr Shearman,

I understand that you're currently canvassing for opinions on the proposed take-over of Ottakar's by HMV, and as a professional writer (publishing under the name Hal Duncan), I thought I'd drop you a quick email to express my own concerns.

The major worry with many writers such as myself, I think, is that the difference in ordering procedures -- with Waterstones entirely centralised whereas Ottakar's allows local branches more choice - may have a negative impact on the diversity of writing available in the small town high street. I've found Ottakar's very supportive of local authors in the past and have been at many readings, signing sessions and book launches which were happily hosted by the nearest branch. The larger chains such as Waterstones and Borders, focused more on city centres, seem also more focused on more popular authors doing book tours. So I worry that less autonomy will mean less opportunity for smaller authors to publicise their works locally. In the case of non-fiction works by local historians and suchlike in particular, I imagine this could be a real issue.

If Ottakar's adopts the centralised ordering system, it also seems to me, in losing some of the diversity of stock, we might find that it becomes more oriented towards work already widely available. It might, I think, end up competing more with WH Smiths in stocking broadly popular works, rather than positioning itself in the middle ground between the stationary/bookshops and the large corporate chains, offering more range than the former but in

more
diverse locales than the latter.

On a purely personal note, I've also found the staff in Ottakar's more courteous and knowledgeable; it may be an illusion but I've often felt a sense that these are proper booksellers rather than retail assistants who might just as easily be working in HMV. The realities of business does mean that this is fundamentally about selling product, but a better service is offered, I believe, when staff know their product, when they care about it.

Anyway, I thank you for the opportunity to express these concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Alasdair Duncan