

Book Detective

Computer Transforms store owner into Sherlock Holmes of Books

By Susan Avery-Hermidaz, Poughkeepsie Journal- Sunday, February 21, 1988

Pick a title, any title. Better yet, pick out a word from a book's title and chances are Scott Meyer and his computer will find it within 30 seconds and be able to tell you the author, publisher, and how many copies are around. And if you want it, he'll get it for you, too.

That's what happened when Meyer, owner of Merritt Books in Millbrook, was asked this week to find a children's poetry book with "boys and girls" in the title.

The red-haired owner spun his chair around and turned to his 1 ½ -year-old software that displayed a long list of titles and the forgotten book from elementary school days appeared, "Beastly Boys and Ghastly Girls" by William Cole. Meyer said he would have the book from England within a few weeks – no deposit required.

Across the country, 162 bookstores and libraries have the same Lasersearch software that allows Meyer to play Sherlock Holmes with book titles. Its California Manufacturer, the Delmar Group, said the disks hold information on 600,000 titles, 10,000 video cassettes, and 10,000 audio cassettes. The company updates the software weekly.

And just in case the user is a bad speller – as Meyer said he is – there is a spelling checker.

Meyer said he expects his business to drastically increase this year because of the system,

Leaning back in his vinyl chair, the one-time burned-out elementary school teacher proudly swept his hand across the two shelves of books he specially ordered through the computer. He said that he never sees about 15 percent of his customers because they live in different parts of the country or the world. About 30 percent of his sales come from the computer.

But not everything is as high-tech at Merritt Books. Meyer's community-oriented attitude lends itself to daily coffee klatches with town locals, who bring their own mugs. He even allows them to use the computer on their own when he's busy.

Meyer specializes as a seeker of goods. The Millbrook native said he'll go to almost any length to get someone a needed product.

"They call me up on the phone and say, 'Are you the man with all the answers?'" Meyer said. Questions have ranged from "Where can I get my chairs caned?" to "Can you find me those plastic pencil sharpeners?"

"I want people not to say, 'Oh, you can't get it in Millbrook,'" Meyer said.