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In a Battle of the E-Readers, Booksellers Spurn Superheroes

By **DAVID STREITFELD**

The tablet wars have begun. Superheroes are the prize — or perhaps the victim.

Amazon, seeking to make its coming Kindle Fire tablet as appealing as possible, negotiated a deal with DC Comics for the exclusive digital rights to a hundred popular graphic novels. Among the series: Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, the Sandman and Watchmen.

Barnes & Noble, with a tablet of its own to nurture, did not like this one bit. Two weeks ago it removed all the copies of the physical volumes from its 1,300 stores, saying it would not carry any book if it were denied the right to sell the digital version.

Books-a-Million, the third-largest bookseller with 231 stores, followed suit last week, making the same argument.

Booksellers of all sorts used to pride themselves on never removing any book from their shelves, but that tradition — born in battles over censorship — is fading as competitive struggles increase. Last year, in a sort of foretaste of the present conflict, Amazon temporarily removed the “buy” buttons for the publisher Macmillan as part of a struggle over e-book pricing.

This time, the stakes are once again high. The two chains are desperate to avoid becoming showrooms for Amazon’s digital warehouse, which would quickly send them to the bookstore graveyard like their former colleague Borders. DC Comics must stay relevant in a world where many of its young male fans read everything on mobile devices — not the most congenial medium for comics. And Amazon must preserve and extend its dominance.

In online comics forums and other places where the issue is being debated, everyone is unhappy with someone. Amazon is being accused by some of throwing its considerable weight around to the detriment of readers and the larger culture. DC Comics is being criticized by others of placing greed over its fans. Barnes & Noble is alternatively being accused of throwing its own weight around and of cutting off its nose to spite its face. Even the comics’ writers are getting some heat.

As Amazon seeks over the next few years to expand its tablet line, these collisions over content are likely to become routine. “It looks like content providers and online purveyors have a few more rounds to go before the Wild West is tamed,” said Lorraine Shanley, a publishing consultant.

DC Comics, a division of Warner Brothers, says it is being misunderstood. But on its own Web site, it said the books would be available “exclusively to Amazon’s newly announced Kindle Fire,” with no qualification. Even the possibility that fans could have access to the books on their iPads through the Kindle app seemed disallowed.

DC now says the books will be available on other e-readers through the Kindle app. “Just because we’re starting with Amazon, this is not the be-all and end-all of our digital strategy and distribution,” said Jim Lee, co-publisher of DC Entertainment, the parent company of DC Comics. He added, however, “We are not at liberty to discuss exactly when” the comics would be available on other e-readers, citing the company’s nondisclosure agreement with Amazon.

Amazon declined to comment about the deal.

DC executives seemed surprised at the speed with which they had alienated some of their devout fans. Some threatened piracy, like NinjaZilla, a poster on a comics forum who wrote: “What will me and my poor iPad do? I’m so sorry DC! Because it is not like I can download all those comics for free, oh wait yes I can, and now I guess I will and maybe I will download every comic DC produces while I am at it!”

Mr. Lee said, “We say to our fans, have a little patience.”

A lot of patience might be required. DC says it took two years of work with Amazon to complete the process of converting the comics into something that could be read and appreciated on the Kindle Fire.

Independent bookstores, which are rarely offered exclusives by publishers, argue that they are bad for consumers.

“A competitive retail market where products are available from lots of different places creates greater choice and a competitive pricing environment,” said Oren Teicher, chief executive of the American Booksellers Association. “Choice is better than no choice.”

Some readers certainly feel that way. Neil Gaiman, the author of the Sandman series, wrote on his blog that he got a “strange deluge of hate mail” after posting on Twitter about the dispute. A sample letter: “I was very excited when I heard that Sandman was coming out as an e-book, but was heartbroken when it was announced that I and my kids won’t have it on our readers.”

Mr. Gaiman, who said he knew nothing about the Amazon deal until it was announced, was critical of Barnes & Noble. “As the author of 12 percent of the books in question, I couldn’t understand why Barnes & Noble’s reaction to Amazon getting a digital exclusive was to effectively give Amazon and the independent stores a physical exclusive as well, and then to publicize that,” he wrote in an e-mail.

“On the other hand,” he added, “they’ve made their point, and other publishers will think twice before giving exclusives.”

The newsletter Publishers Lunch said Mr. Gaiman, the best-selling and award-winning author of “The Graveyard Book” and other fantasies, was among those invited to the second annual Campfire, organized by Jeffrey P. Bezos, Amazon’s chief executive. The secret event, where leading writers and intellectuals gather for three days of fun and discussion, was reportedly held last weekend in Santa Fe, N.M. Mr. Gaiman declined to say if he was there. Amazon had no comment.

The issue of availability has also surfaced with one of the biggest authors, J. K. Rowling. For the first time, the [Harry Potter](#) books will be available as e-books, but only through her own site, Pottermore. A Barnes & Noble spokeswoman said “that case is not the same,” and that it would continue selling the Potter books.

One group is watching the tablet war with a certain detached amusement: comic book stores.

“This fight between Amazon and Barnes & Noble is like the tide or a storm or an earthquake,” said Jack Rems, owner of the Escapist Comic Bookstore in Berkeley, Calif. “Nothing I can do about it.”

Well, there is one thing. Escapist is offering 20 percent off all the DC titles that the chains removed. Mr. Rems said he hoped the deal would bring some new business in the door.



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