

How about six volumes on cooking for \$461?

High-end books still sell in age of e-everything

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How much would you pay for a book?

Not for a rare book, a Shakespeare folio or a Gutenberg Bible to keep under glass, but for a volume simply to grace your bookshelves or your coffee table.

Would \$199 be too much? Sports artist Dick Perez hopes that 5,000 people are willing to put out that amount for *The Immortals*, a collection of his portraits of Baseball Hall of Famers.

What about \$461.62? That's what online bookseller Amazon is asking for Microsoft executive-turned-chef Nathan Myhrvold's new, six-volume culinary compendium *Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking*.

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How about \$15,000, the publisher's list price for the "Champ's Edition" of *GOAT: A Tribute to Muhammad Ali (Greatest of All Time)*, featuring more than 3,000 images, plus a small sculpture by Jeff Koons and four silver gelatin prints signed by photographer Howard L. Bingham and Ali? Or \$4,500 for the "Collector's Edition," with a Koons photo-litho instead of the sculpture and without the silver gelatin prints?

In an era when the popularity of e-books has exploded and hardcover volumes seem destined to go the way of the LP, high-priced books are holding on.

"Expensive coffee-table books are not facing the same pressures as other books," says Lynn Andriani, a senior editor for the trade journal *Publishers Weekly*. "The expensive books keep coming."

That's because e-books don't satisfy a book lover's

yen for "that really nice special edition," explains her colleague, PW features editor Andrew R. Albanese.

Beauty sells, and costly books are all about beauty, usually in the form of art or photography. The book itself becomes a piece of art, "something tactile, that you can hold and feel and see the quality of," says Creed Poulson, public-relations manager for the American subsidiary of the German firm Taschen. Taschen publishes *GOAT* and other high-end books, including a "Collector's Edition" of *Linda McCartney: Life in Photographs* that comes in a clamshell box, is signed by Paul McCartney, and sells for \$1,000. (The trade edition, not signed by Paul, is \$69.99).

Rarely, an expensive book surprises even its publisher and sells a lot more copies than anticipated. *The Red Book*, a reproduction of an illuminated manuscript by the famed psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, has racked up about 50,000 sales in English language translation since W.W. Norton published it in October 2009, says James Mairs, its editor. The volume, which measures 18 inches long by 12.3 inches wide by 2.5 inches thick and weighs 9.4 pounds, carries a price tag of \$195, but is available online for \$109.

The Red Book is "an anomaly," Mairs adds. The manuscript, in which Jung worked out some of the essentials of his psychology, had lain unpublished for decades in a safe in Switzerland, where only a few people had access to it. "There was a pent-up demand that we don't see for

many books we publish," Mairs says.

The coffee-table niche is seldom so wide. While expensive books may not be going away, their audience remains small and their production costs large, a combination that makes publishers cautious. Mairs' colleagues at Norton proceeded cautiously with *The Red Book*, rejecting Mairs' suggestion of a first printing of 15,000 in favor of a safer 5,000. Even Taschen does not deal exclusively in big-ticket books. Its catalogue includes a *GOAT* edition for \$150 and other titles for less than \$20.

Bookstores are even warier than publishers of expensive titles. Chain bookstores, which rely on moving large numbers of books quickly, don't want to carry books priced north of \$200, says Publishers Weekly's Albanese. Independent bookstores are also chary of such costly books. Michael Fox, proprietor of Joseph Fox Booksellers in Center City, says he handles "maybe one or two at Christmas time."

Taschen solves the problem by having its own chain of 12 bookstores in the United States and Europe, but that's not a road many publishers want to travel.

Faced with cautious publishers and reluctant bookstores, some authors like Perez and Myhrvold opt for self-publishing, becoming part of what Albanese calls "a very strong trend."

"A lot of authors are examining the price of production and finding that the margins kind of work for them," Albanese says. The Internet makes it possible for them to sell their books themselves rather than rely on a publisher for distribution. "It's not that difficult to reach a global market [online]," Albanese says, though he says it's "not exactly a mature market."

Still, Perez and Myhrvold think it's mature enough.

Perez, official artist of the Phillies and formerly official artist of the Baseball Hall of Fame, acknowledges that *The Immortals* is "a niche book, even though it's baseball and baseball is popular. It's not a Stephen King book, or Ken Follett, or whatever."

Which is why he decided to print only 5,000 copies of the 560-page book, which includes 1,400 of his paintings, about 400 of them not previously published. He has no plans for a second printing.

The former graphic designer put the book together himself. He got historian William C. Kashatus to write the text.

"It's a huge book," says Perez, in the living room of his Wayne home, which is lined with his work and lit like an art gallery. "The stock is 100-pound test, which is the best. The stock and the binding is probably more than the printing." He says each volume costs about \$50 to \$75 to produce, not including his time during the last three years.

Perez did his own marketing, designing a brochure and mailing thousands of copies. (The book is sold through Amazon.com and www.dickperez-immortals.com)

Perez' strategy has been to sell the book as a collectible. It helps that "people know me as the baseball artist," he says.

And while it's a product of passion, Perez wants it to be profitable. "I've got my legacy there," he says. "If I break even, maybe make a few bucks, I'm happy."

Like Perez, Myhrvold, Microsoft's former chief technology officer, decided to self-publish his big book. He talked to commercial publishers, but decided early in 2010 to go his own way, said Wayt Gibbs, the cookbook's editor.

"There were a couple of factors," says Gibbs, a former se-

nior writer for Scientific American magazine. "Commercial publishers are limited in some respects with books for which demand is unproven. The natural thing is to err on the side of prudence and order fewer rather than more. There's a pretty steep manufacturing cost, so the price has to be pretty high for that reason — so much so that it's *terra incognita* for commercial publishers. Nathan comes from a different business perspective. It didn't make sense to sink all this capital into producing so few books that you barely make a profit at it."

Gibbs explains that Myhrvold "set out to make a smaller book that would be priced under \$100," but the scope of the project "grew and grew," expanding to six volumes — five volumes of recipes and a one-volume kitchen manual.

About 50 people worked on the project at one time or another, says Gibbs: "Four full-time research cooks, an art director ... dozens of freelance writers and editors, as well as two indexers."

Why did someone like Myhrvold, with his extensive computer background, not just opt for digital publication?

The beauty factor.

"He chose print because it's the best way to show big, beautiful, explanatory photos," Gibbs says. "If you shrink that down and put it on a small screen, the text becomes illegible."

By mid-April, orders for the set had reached 8,000, exceeding the first printing of 6,000 copies, according to the *Modernist Cuisine* website. "The remaining 2,000 or so orders ... will be filled when copies arrive from the second printing, starting in July," Gibbs continued.

Myhrvold and his team "are quite relieved and pleased

with the demand for this book," Gibbs says. "We're looking for a much larger second printing."

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"Linda McCartney: *Life in Photographs*," published by Taschen, sells for \$1,000 and includes Paul McCartney's signature.



Nathan Myhrvold's "Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking," sells for \$641. By mid-April, orders for the set reached 8,000.