

## Shopping eBay® in Moderation

by K. A. Young

EBay® features online auctions, but if that's your only concept of eBay, you're missing the gestalt, the big picture. eBay is an Earth-sized flea market in cyberspace. It's an international garage sale where people the world over offer new and previously owned items of every ilk imaginable. It's like the biggest department store window you ever shopped through. That's why eBay can be addictive. It's an equal opportunity addiction, appealing to both sexes and to all races, colors, and creeds (except possibly the Amish, who, if they got a taste of it would probably smuggle battery-operated laptops into their farm houses). eBay can be a bargain-hunter's dream or recurring nightmare; it all depends on whether you get hooked, or you're able to shop eBay in moderation.

I ought to know. eBay aroused in me an innocent curiosity that quickly flamed into red hot passion, which left uncontrolled, could easily have become OBSESSION. I had approached eBay at first with some trepidation. This was quickly dispelled by the welcome mat of instructions on the first screen. So I started window-shopping. Soon, the bold-colored banners and the featured photos mesmerized me. I discovered the search button was a magic carpet ride around an endless mall. With the world's stores at my fingertips, it was hard to remember a time when I had no interest whatsoever in German novels, Russian chess sets, Canadian collectibles, or Dutch postzegels.

It was inevitable I would become a bidder. I began by making a rational decision to bid on a Christian CD. I, as most timid first-time bidders, entered a modest maximum as soon as I saw the desired item and then patiently waited for the auction to expire. I was fortunate; I lost. The darts of denial pierced my heart when in the last 10 seconds of the auction, somebody sniped me. For the uninitiated, let me explain. Sniping is the art of waiting to place a maximum bid until only a few feeble seconds remain in the auction, thereby eliminating the opposition's opportunity to bid again if his maximum was lower—as mine had been. I suffered for days from the pain of that loss, but it most likely kept me from becoming a hopeless addict. I later won a book, then some music, a few videos, and a chess set. I was plunging headlong into the abyss, the memory of that defeat my only parachute.

With my first heady win, my mild-mannered attitude changed. I turned aggressive, taking sadistic pleasure in sniping others. Yet, while my dark side exhibited itself online, the child in me took enormous pleasure in finding my mailbox daily stuffed with packages to unwrap. Before long, my bank account was bare. Buying on eBay is especially dangerous for the less-than-fabulously-wealthy because most transactions are conducted entirely online without any conscious awareness of currency being relinquished. All I had to do in most cases was click the PayPal<sup>®</sup> button, and money was instantly transferred from my bank account to the seller's—entirely painless, that is, until my bank statement arrived. Seeing red and the few disappointing transactions I experienced were all that kept me from disappearing into the eBay buyer's void.

That's when I became a seller. I did it at first to finance my online buying habit, but soon the excitement of receiving emails from Sweden, asking about my used car parts, and mailing bundles of vinyl LPs to everywhere from New York to Australia got a real hold on me. Watching my PayPal account balance increase instead of decrease fueled the fire. Little did it matter that a chunk of my profit went to eBay and PayPal fees as well as to postage and gasoline for repeated trips to the post office, and that an even larger chunk of my time went into taking digital photos, listing items for sale, and answering emails. It *seemed* I was making money with hardly any effort at all. It wasn't long before I began to look around the house to see what else I could find to sell—a board game, an electric Christmas angel, a china soup tureen and matching cake platter. When I had exhausted everything reasonable, I began to cast an evil eye towards gifts from friends, heirlooms, the neighbor's cat, the kitchen sink. Thankfully, one buyer proved to be a real nuisance. He didn't like what he bought from me and was downright nasty about it. The hassle I endured was a hard slap in the face, waking me up before I sold my soul on eBay.

Reading the 156 comments other eBayers posted publicly about me—saying what a good seller and buyer I was—massaged my ego; but one day, I realized going crazy and going broke wasn't worth all the positive feedback in the world. If you shop eBay, take my advice. Set an alarm clock to limit cyber-window-shopping, hide cherished valuables so you aren't tempted to sell them for pennies to strangers, and pray you'll encounter a frustrating transaction here and there and be sniped fairly often so you'll be cautious enough to shop eBay in moderation.

THE END