Buying
used Macs

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Contents

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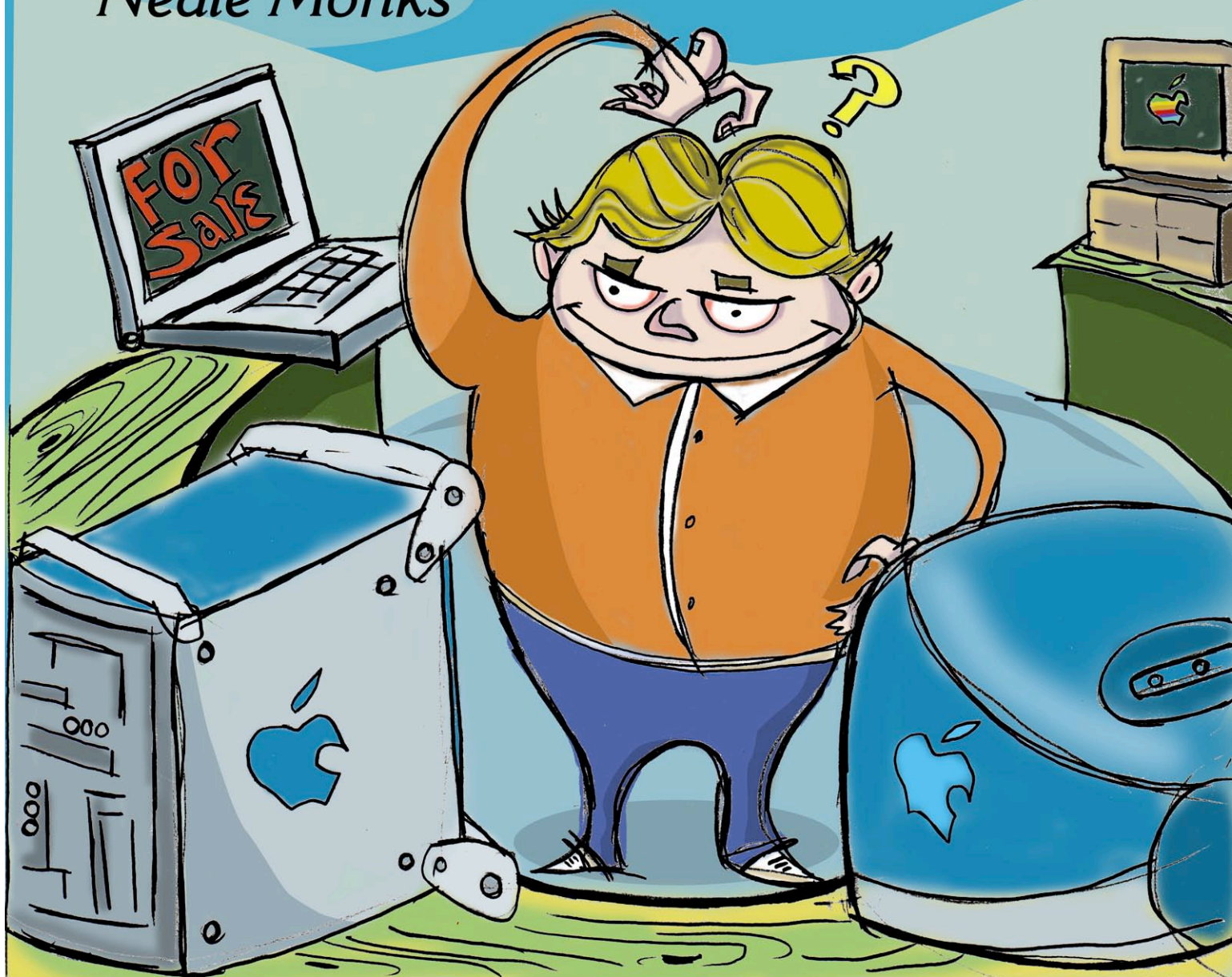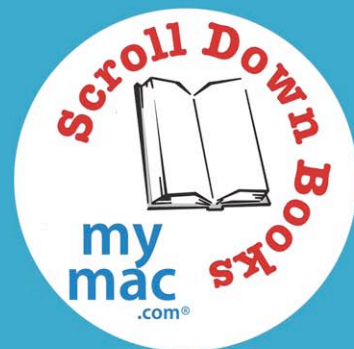
Chapter 1
Why buy a used Mac?

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Yesterday's technology today

Buying a used Mac offers you a way to save a lot of money without losing too much performance — in fact it's much the same deal as with buying a used automobile. However, the difference is that while a used car can drive on a modern highway without any trouble, an older Mac may have problems using new software and if that Mac is more than a few years old it probably won't run the current operating system, OS X, at all. The difference of course is that while a car today does the same thing it did twenty years ago, with only small changes to styling or fuel economy, the roster of tasks a home computer does expands every year. Someone using a Mac IIci in 1990 only expected their computer to tackle tasks such as word processing, page layout, 2D drawing, photo editing, and databasing. Nowadays, someone with an iMac will also want to use their computer to design web pages, edit digital video, play DVDs, rip CDs, play 3D games, and surf the Internet. In other words, every year we expect our computers to do more, and older machines that cannot keep up with us are left by the wayside. In addition, the older the Mac is, the less it compatible it is likely to be with modern standards of connectivity and storage. So many of the peripherals used widely today, such as printers and iPods, cannot be used with older Macs that lack USB and FireWire ports.

Nonetheless, there are lots of good reasons for

buying a used Mac. The most obvious is that for many people, a used Mac allows them to get a Mac that they couldn't otherwise afford. For what an entry-level iMac would cost new, you could pick up a used G3 or G4 Power Mac and get plenty of extra expansion potential. If all you need from a 'new' Mac in your home or office is a machine to tackle a specific set of tasks, such as operating as a server of some kind or for web browsing and email, then a used Mac can fit the bill nicely.

The economic argument is even more compelling when you're looking at portable Macs: iBooks and PowerBooks are inherently expensive things, and a used PowerBook can be a great satellite system to use alongside your main desktop Mac. Because the chief feature of any laptop is its portability, it's often the case that a relatively old PowerBook is every bit as useful as a brand new one. A used PowerBook 3400 or PowerBook G3 can be connected to wireless networks, surf the Internet, check email, deliver PowerPoint presentations, and be used for word processing on the go just as easily and effectively as the latest G4 PowerBook that might cost ten times as much. This is obviously a very attractive option for people who want mobile computing on a budget, for example college students and small businesses.

Another good reason to get an older Mac is compatibility with older software and hardware. If you regularly need to run OS 9 (or older) applications, a used Mac can make a more stable platform that the Classic mode of OS X which tends not to play well with peripherals such as devices that connect to the serial or SCSI port, such as frame

ANOTHER GOOD REASON TO GET AN OLDER MAC IS COMPATIBILITY WITH OLDER SOFTWARE AND HARDWARE.

grabbers and scientific data collection devices. There may even be old applications that simply don't work in the Classic mode of OS X at all.

Vintage and collectable Macs

Collecting old Macs simply for their intrinsic curiosity value or because of their place in the history of computing. Some designs have become iconic, representing the best that the Apple Industrial Design group can do, such as the Macintosh 128, the PowerBook 500, and the original Bondi Blue iMac. Because these computers revolutionised computer design and marketing, they can often be seen in science, technology, and design museums, and many people have added them to their private collections of old computers as well. Other designs mean rather less to the world at large but have earned a special place among Mac enthusiasts. Top of this list are the compact Macs with color screens such as the Color Classic, which, by any objective standard is a mediocre computer at best with a small screen and a slow processor. But it is a quintessential Mac in many ways, and remembered with affection by many people who have used it. Other people simply like to get hold of the rarer Macs that for whatever reason never became popular but still reflect interesting phases in Apple's history, such as the Mac Portable, the Mac TV, and the Twentieth Anniversary Macintosh.

Fortunately for the collector, most of these older Macs can be picked up relatively inexpensively, often for less than $100. The Color Classic and its siblings tend to be a bit more expensive, but are still well

within the hobbyist's price range. Part of the fun with the older Macs is seeing how much you can do with them, for example turning a Mac Plus into a web server.

How much should I spend?

Giving prices for used Macs is very difficult because over time prices tend to go down, and so anything I quote here is likely to be out of date six or twelve months after this book is published. It is also important to remember that different vendors have their own pricing plans, and these usually reflect other services they offer with the computer. So a computer that costs very little when bought from a thrift store won't have a warranty and may not even work properly, whereas something for sale in a used computer store may have a limited period warranty as well as offering you the chance to test the machine out yourself. Online retail and auction sites have their own advantages and disadvantages, and it is very important to look at the whole picture — the price of the computer, shipping, and any warranty offered — when choosing between the different places that you might buy your computer. As always, lower prices comes with greater risks, and so if you want the best chance of getting a good machine and the security of knowing the dealer will put right any problems, opt for a reputable used computer retailer every time.

However, there are some other factors that affect the price of the machine beyond where and how you will buy it. The age of the computer is a critical one, with older computers costing less but delivering less computing power as well. Eventually there comes a

cut-off point where an old computer may be cheap but isn't able to do any of the things you need it to do, or else does them so slowly that it costs you in terms of productivity and efficiency.

Processor type and speed trumps everything else

Almost always, the best advice is to buy the fastest computer you can, and to do that go by the generation of the processor inside the computer and not just the raw speed in megahertz (for example a computer with a 500 MHz G4 processor would be faster than one with a 600 MHz G3). While computing speed is the crucial factor here, it's also important to remember that software developers tend to drop older computer types not by speed but by processor types, for example OS X will install and run on a 333 MHz iMac that may be in many ways slower than a 500 MHz 604 Power Mac. You'll see much the same thing for web browsers, multimedia plug-ins, games, and so on.

The IBM G5 Processor

It's also important to remember that while extra memory and a large hard drive can mitigate a bottleneck caused by a slow processor, they cannot completely negate it. So if you're on a budget, spending money on the processor first, and then upgrading the hard drive and memory later on can make a lot of sense. Similarly, a graphics card can help run games better, but a faster processor helps even more, so if you think you want to do some gaming, get the fastest computer you can now, and then choose a third-party PCI graphics card later.

Budget realistically

Just because you're buying a used Mac doesn't mean you're going to get a G4 tower for $99. Only Macs lacking a PowerPC processor, such as the Quadras, early PowerBooks, and compact Macs, commonly go for less than a $100, but apart from the all-in-one compact Macs and PowerBooks, this will be certainly be exclusive of the monitor and possibly exclusive of the keyboard and mouse. Power Macintosh computers without a G3 processor usually sell for between $75 and $150 depending on the configuration, and it probably isn't worth spending much more on essentially obsolete computers that cannot run OS X. G3 towers and iMacs can be had for $200 to $500, and G4 systems of various kinds, including PowerBooks, go for about $750 to $1000.

Obviously, the more money you spend, the more carefully you should factor in things like a warranty and shipping insurance. While you might be prepared to take a gamble on a $50 compact Mac you buy off eBay, you probably don't want to throw away $1000 on a G4 iMac that turns out to be a lemon.

Always keep in mind how much a new Mac costs — for example the base model eMac, with a 1.25 GHz G4 processor, 256 MB of RAM, and a 40 GB of storage, sells for $800. So if you're spending much more than half this sum on something that cannot run OS X, lacks built-in Ethernet or a modem, will need a hefty hard drive and memory upgrade, and doesn't have an advanced graphics card suitable for gaming, then you're spending too much.

JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE BUYING A USED MAC DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE GOING TO GET A G4 TOWER FOR $99.

About this book

This book serves three purposes. The first is to describe the used Mac market and to indicate the best ways to find used Macs at good prices. This is the focus of the next chapter. Chapter 3 reviews most of the desktop Macs made from 1984 through to the G4 Power Macs and iMacs, commenting on what each series is best suited to, which are the best value models, and what upgrades make sense. I also mark out those few Macs that are either badly designed or else excessively compromised so that you can avoid them if they come your way. Chapter 4 does the same thing with the portable Macs, ending with the Titanium (rather than Aluminium) G4 PowerBooks and the G3 iBooks. Chapter 5 looks at various topics associated with getting your used Mac up and running, such as how to connect an older Mac to a newer one so that you can transfer files between them. Finally, in Chapter 6 we look at your options for getting software and peripherals for vintage Macs. An Appendix includes some useful web sites and used Mac retailers, but lots more web links are included in the text where relevant.