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Amazon Glitch Unmasks War Of Reviewers

By AMY HARMON
Published: February 14, 2004

Close observers of Amazon.com noticed something peculiar this week: the company's Canadian site had suddenly revealed the identities of thousands of people who had anonymously posted book reviews on the United States site under signatures like "a reader from New York."

The weeklong glitch, which Amazon fixed after outed reviewers complained, provided a rare glimpse at how writers and readers are wielding the online reviews as a tool to promote or pan a book -- when they think no one is watching.

John Rechy, author of the best-selling 1963 novel "City of Night" and winner of the PEN-USA West lifetime achievement award, is one of several prominent authors who have apparently pseudonymously written themselves five-star reviews, Amazon's highest rating. Mr. Rechy, who laughed about it when approached, sees it as a means to survival when online stars mean sales.

"That anybody is allowed to come in and anonymously trash a book to me is absurd," said Mr. Rechy, who, having been caught, freely admitted to praising his new book, "The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens," on Amazon under the signature "a reader from Chicago." "How to strike back? Just go in and rebut every single one of them."

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Mr. Rechy is in good company. Walt Whitman and Anthony Burgess both famously reviewed their own books under assumed names. But several modern-day writers said the Internet, where anyone from your mother to your ex-agent can anonymously broadcast an opinion of your work, has created a more urgent need for self-defense.

Under Amazon's system, any user may submit a review without publicly providing any personal information (or evidence of having read the book). The posting of real names on the Canadian site was for many a reminder that anonymity on the Internet is seldom a sure thing.

"It was an unfortunate error," said Patricia Smith, an Amazon spokeswoman. "We'll examine whatever happened and make sure it won't happen again."

But even with reviewer privacy restored, many people say Amazon's pages have turned into what one writer called "a rhetorical war," where friends and family members are regularly corralled to write glowing reviews and each negative one is scrutinized for the digital fingerprints of known enemies.

One well-known writer admitted privately -- and gleefully -- to anonymously criticizing a more prominent novelist who he felt had unfairly reaped critical praise for years. She regularly posts responses, or at least he thinks it is her, but the elegant rebuttals of his reviews are also written from behind a pseudonym.

Numbering 10 million and growing by tens of thousands each week, the reader reviews are the most popular feature of Amazon's sites, according to the company, which also culls reviews from more traditional critics like Publishers Weekly. Many authors applaud the democracy of allowing readers to voice their opinions, and rejoice when they see a new one posted -- so long as it is positive.

But some authors say it is ironic that while they can for the first time face their critics on equal footing, so many people on both sides choose to remain anonymous. And some charge that the same anonymity that encourages more people to discuss books also spurs them to write reviews that they would never otherwise attach their names to.

Jonathan Franzen, author of "The Corrections," winner of the National Book Award, said that a first book by Tom Bissell last fall was "crudely and absurdly savaged" on Amazon in anonymous reviews he believed were posted by a group of writers whom Mr. Bissell had previously written about in the literary magazine *The Believer*.

"With the really flamingly negative reviews, I think it's always worth asking yourself what kind of person has time to write them," Mr. Franzen said. "I know that the times when I've been tempted to write a nasty review online, I have never had attractive motives." Mr. Franzen declined to say whether he had ever given in to such temptation.

The suspicion that the same group of writers, known as the Underground Literary Alliance, had anonymously attacked his friend Heidi Julavits prompted the novelist Dave Eggers to write a review last August calling Ms. Julavits's first novel "one of the best books of the year."

Mr. Eggers, whose memoir, "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," made him a literary celebrity, chose to post his review as "a reader from St. Louis, MO." But the review appeared under the name "David K Eggers" on Amazon's Canadian site on Monday, and Mr. Eggers confirmed by e-mail that he had written it.

"I've done that one or two times before, when I like a book and the reviews on Amazon seem bizarre," Mr. Eggers said. "In this case I just tried to bring back some balance."

Michael Jackman of the Alliance, which champions "underground writing" and has been critical of contemporary writers' focus on themselves rather than the wider world, called the presumption that his group had written the anonymous reviews "the height of arrogance."

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