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The Best Book Reviews Money Can Buy



Nick Oxford for The New York Times

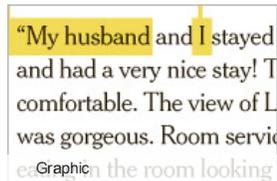
Todd Jason Rutherford inside his home in Bixby, Okla. He says that he is now suspicious of all online reviews — whether of books or of anything else.

By DAVID STREITFELD

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Leah Nash for The New York Times
Ashly Lorenzana paid Mr. Rutherford

TODD RUTHERFORD was 7 years old when he first understood the nature of supply and demand. He was with a bunch of other boys, one of whom showed off a copy of Playboy to giggles and intense interest. Todd bought the magazine for \$5, tore out the racy pictures and resold them to his chums for a buck apiece. He made \$20 before his father shut him down a few hours later.

A few years ago, Mr. Rutherford, then in his mid-30s, had another flash of illumination about how scarcity opens the door to opportunity.

He was part of the marketing department of a company that provided services to self-published writers — services that included persuading traditional media and blogs to review the books. It was uphill work. He could churn out press releases all day long, trying to be noticed, but there is only so much space for the umpteenth vampire novel or yet another self-improvement manifesto or one more homespun recollection of times gone by. There were not enough reviewers to go around.

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to review her self-published book, "Sex, Drugs & Being an Escort." She would later write a negative posting about his review service on several consumer Web sites.

Suddenly it hit him. Instead of trying to cajole others to review a client's work, why not cut out the middleman and write the review himself? Then it would say exactly what the client wanted — that it was a terrific book. A shattering novel. A classic memoir. Will change your life. Lyrical and gripping, Stunning and compelling. Or words to that effect.

In the fall of 2010, Mr. Rutherford started a Web site, GettingBookReviews.com. At first, he advertised that he would review a book for \$99. But some clients wanted a chorus proclaiming their excellence. So, for \$499, Mr. Rutherford would do 20 online reviews. A few people needed a whole orchestra. For \$999, he would do 50.

There were immediate complaints in online forums that the service was violating the sacred arm's-length relationship between reviewer and author. But there were also orders, a lot of them. Before he knew it, he was taking in \$28,000 a month.

A polite fellow with a rakish goatee and an entrepreneurial bent, Mr. Rutherford has been on the edges of publishing for most of his career. Before working for the self-publishing house, he owned a distributor of inspirational books. Before that, he was sales manager for a religious publishing house. Nothing ever quite worked out as well as he hoped. With the reviews business, though, "it was like I hit the mother lode."

Reviews by ordinary people have become an essential mechanism for selling almost anything online; they are used for resorts, dermatologists, neighborhood restaurants, high-fashion boutiques, churches, parks, astrologers and healers — not to mention products like garbage pails, tweezers, spa slippers and cases for tablet computers. In many situations, these reviews are supplanting the marketing department, the press agent, advertisements, word of mouth and the professional critique.

But not just any kind of review will do. They have to be somewhere between enthusiastic and ecstatic.

"The wheels of online commerce run on positive reviews," said [Bing Liu, a data-mining expert at the University of Illinois, Chicago](#), whose 2008 research showed that 60 percent of the millions of product reviews on Amazon are five stars and an additional 20 percent are four stars. "But almost no one wants to write five-star reviews, so many of them have to be created."

Consumer reviews are powerful because, unlike old-style advertising and marketing, they offer the illusion of truth. They purport to be testimonials of real people, even though some are bought and sold just like everything else on the commercial Internet.

Mr. Liu estimates that about one-third of all consumer reviews on the Internet are fake. Yet it is all but impossible to tell when reviews were written by the marketers or retailers (or by the authors themselves under pseudonyms), [by customers](#) (who might get a deal from a merchant for giving a good score) or [by a hired third-party service](#).

The Federal Trade Commission has issued guidelines stating that all online endorsements need to make clear when there is a financial relationship, but enforcement has been minimal and there has been a lot of confusion in the blogosphere over how this affects traditional book reviews.

The tale of GettingBookReviews.com, which commissioned 4,531 reviews in its brief existence, is a story of a vast but hidden corner of the Internet, where Potemkin villages bursting with ardor arise overnight. At the same time, it shows how the book world is being transformed by the surging popularity of electronic self-publishing.

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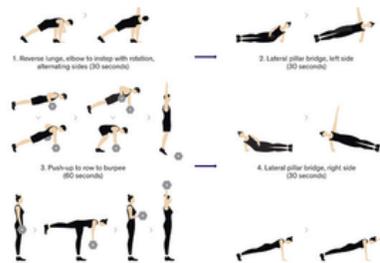
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That's like saying a thief who supplies good merchandise should be supported and patronized.

This country is a sick farce,

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Oprah hypes the latest thoroughly worthless piece of junk and the next day, the author heads for the Ferrari showroom. Is that somehow LESS depressing and corrupt than the abysmal practice of paid-for-reviews described here?

And what of the NY Time Bestseller list? Is there a more repellent way of ranking books than by how many were sold? Absurd and deeply distastafull

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